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THE ERAWAN WAR

Volume 2: The CIA Paramilitary Campaign in Laos, 1969-1974

ASIA@WAR SERIES

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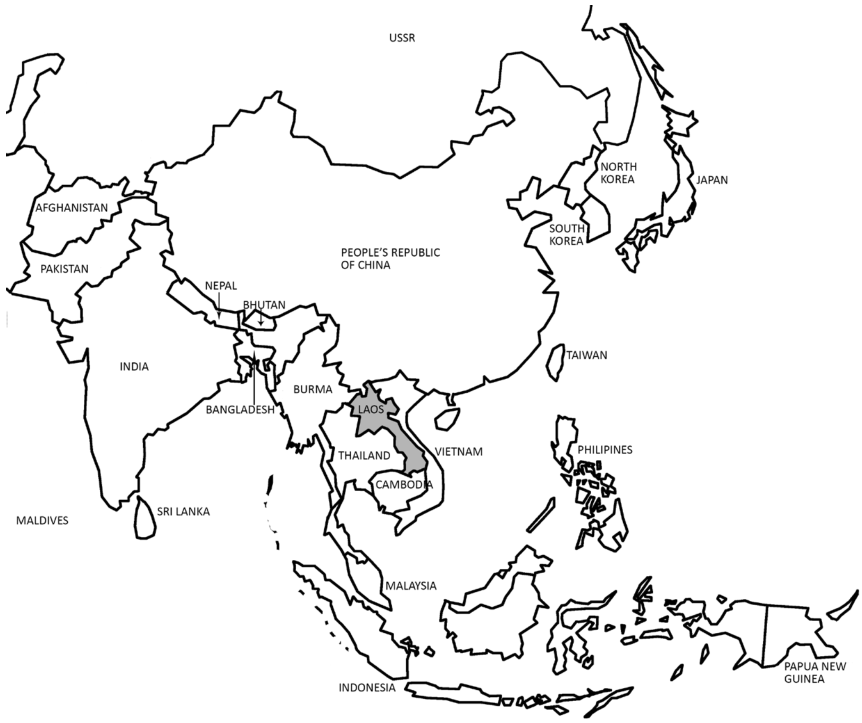
CONTENTS

Abbreviations 2
Introduction 2

1 Pushing the Envelope 2
2 The Commando Raiders 5
3 Payback 8
4 Firing on All Cylinders 15
5 Expanding the War 20
6 Defying Washington 29
7 House of Cards 37
8 Parting Shots 45
9 Integration 57

Sources and Bibliography 62
About the Author 64



Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

ABBREVIATIONS

ADC	*auto defense d’choc*, company-sized militia formations under the CIA irregular program
BA	*bataillon artillerie,* literally “artillery battalion.” The name given to Thai artillery battalions in Project Unity
BC	*bataillon commando*, literally “commando battalion.” The name given to Thai volunteer battalions in Project Unity
BG	*bataillon guerriers*, literally “warrior battalion.” The redesignation of SGU battalions
CASI	Continental Air Services, Inc
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
Dac Cong	Literally “special mission” in Vietnamese. The term for PAVN special operations units
FAG	Forward Air Guide
FAR	*Forces Armées Royales*, or Royal Armed Forces of Laos
FG/E	Forces Guerrilla/East, the guerrilla zone covering the eastern part of MR 1. Headquartered at Luang Prabang
FG/NW	Forces Guerrilla/Northwest, the guerrilla zone covering the northwestern part of MR 1. Headquartered at Nam Yu
FSB	Fire Support Base
GB	Guerrilla Battalion
GM	*Groupement Mobile*, a regiment consisting of three to four battalions
GZ	Guerrilla Zone, the name for paramilitary sectors in MR 4
JLD	Joint Liaison Detachment, the cover designation for the CIA paramilitary base at Udorn
LIF	Lao Irregular Forces
LS	Lima Site, the name given to up-country airfields in Laos
MR	Military Region
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
PARU	Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit
PAVN	People’s Army of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
PDJ	*Plaine des Jarres*, or Plain of Jars
PRU	Provincial Reconnaissance Unit, CIA-supported counterinsurgency teams in South Vietnam
PS	Pakse Site, the name given to airfields in MR 4
RI	*régiment d’infanterie*
RLAF	Royal Lao Air Force
RLG	Royal Lao Government
RTA	Royal Thai Army
RTAFB	Royal Thai Air Force Base
RTSF	Royal Thai Special Forces
SGU	Special Guerrilla Unit
SR	Special Requirements, the cover designation for RTA artillery units posted in Laos
TACAN	Tactical Navigation beacon
USAF	U.S. Air Force
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USSF	U.S. Army Special Forces
VPAF	Vietnam People’s Air Force, the air force of North Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Volume 2 of *The Erawan War* picks up exactly where Volume 1 left off, and the reader is, of course, encouraged to read that volume first. In brief however, after the Kingdom of Laos devolved into a three-way civil war during the second half of 1960, the US Central Intelligence Agency in early 1961 initiated a paramilitary program to bolster the hand of the rightist Royal Lao Government (RLG). This quickly became a multi-faceted operation, to include the creation of armed hilltribe units known as Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) as well as intelligence-gathering teams that would monitor the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

As the communist threat to the RLG escalated over the course of the 1960s, so too did the size and scope of the CIA’s paramilitary effort. The SGUs, which were initially battalion-sized, were grouped into regiments by 1967. This volume picks up the program in mid-1969, when the CIA’s guerrilla regiments were being pitted against North Vietnamese infantry divisions in major operations that were increasingly conventional in nature.

1

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

Down in MR 3, the CIA opened 1969 with a major reorganisation of guerrilla forces. Such changes were greatly aided by the overwhelming influence the Agency enjoyed in the region. Savannakhet Unit, for example, did not have to contend with a complex subculture of ethnic minority leaders, as was the case with the Hmong in MR 2. And Savannakhet Unit did not have to defer to powerful local politicians who were looking to nose their way into the irregular program, as was sometimes the case in Luang Prabang and Pakse.

Indeed, Savannakhet was unique in the amount of autonomy afforded the CIA and its budding guerrilla program. General Bounpone Makthepharak, the MR 3 commander, took great pains

MR 3 commander Bounpone Makthepharak (right) presents a plaque (featuring the MR 3 SGU logo) to departing Savannakhet Unit Chief Dick Cornish, April 1970. The incoming Savannakhet Unit Chief, Gordon Dibble (left), was a Yale graduate and Iwo Jima veteran with prior CIA tours in South Asia. (Photo courtesy Mike Magnani)

to give the Americans all the leeway they desired. As a result, the CIA from an early date made all levels of the MR 3 SGU program fully responsive to its needs and desires. Unlike in other regions, paramilitary officers in Savannakhet could hire and fire SGU commanders. Paramilitary officers in MR 3 also directly handled wages, unlike the indirect payrolls in other regions that fostered corruption. Too, they directly supervised ammunition and food distribution.

Wielding such influence, Savannakhet Unit in early 1969 was easily able to act on a directive from the JLD at Udorn calling for the disbandment of its sole 550-man SGU battalion, to be replaced with an expanded force of five smaller SGU battalions of three 115-man companies apiece. In doing so, Savannakhet would be going full circle, returning to its original 1967 light battalion arrangement. Though that earlier experiment had been found wanting, it was now thought that with more than a year of experience, the three-company formations could be more expertly employed in action operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In accordance with Udorn's directive, MR 3's first three light SGU battalions — dubbed Red, White and Blue Battalions — took shape at Nong Saphong. As a field-test, Red Battalion was chosen to stage Operation Duck, a raid against a Pathet Lao base hidden in a cave just southeast of Mahaxay. On 23 March, choppers kicked off the operation by infiltrating two of Red Battalion's three companies under heavy USAF fighter cover. Instructed to salvage documents and destroy the complex, the irregulars immediately ran up against stiff communist resistance and retreated south.

For those in Savannakhet with institutional memory, the Duck failure offered a bit of déjà vu, resulting in a near repeat of the same shortcomings demonstrated by the SGU battalion at Lak Sao in 1967. Still, the order to raise five small battalions stood.

By July, a fourth unit, named Green Battalion, took shape. With four battalions on hand and the summer monsoons bogging down communist forces, Savannakhet Unit was itching to go on the offensive against a more modest target. With that in mind, the village of Tang Vai, 31 kilometres southeast of the RLG (Royal Lao Government) front line at Moung Phalane, was chosen for a limited probe. On 28 July, Savannakhet Unit ordered one company from Red Battalion to begin the Tang Vai operation. Encountering little opposition, the irregulars that same day occupied the village's airfield; the enemy, in response, barely stirred. Five days later, Green Battalion was choppered in and, together with Red Battalion, headed east.

With generous USAF and RLAF air support, the two battalions made remarkable progress. On 28 August, with its troops advancing into a vacuum, Savannakhet Unit (no doubt envious of the headlines grabbed by Vang Pao's unfolding Kou Kiet campaign) reworked its Tang Vai foray into a full-blown guerrilla offensive. Their plan now called for three SGU battalions to sweep east beginning 1 September. By 6 September, they were scheduled to block the Route 9-23 junction (just nine kilometres west of Moung Phine), secure Route 23 extending south from Moung Phine, and, finally, occupy Moung Phine for a week. The operation was named Junction City Junior, both a reference to the road intersection at Moung Phine and a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the massive 1967 Junction City campaign staged by U.S. forces in South Vietnam.

In targeting Moung Phine, Savannakhet Unit would be going directly for the Pathet Lao jugular. As the only town of note held by the Pathet Lao in the entire panhandle, Moung Phine was known to contain a POW camp, depots, and a significant portion of the regional Pathet Lao political apparatus. In addition, Moung Phine was home to several thousand villagers, many conscripted as communist corvée labour in and around the town.

To bring the Junction City Junior attack force up to its designated three battalions, White Battalion was lifted to Tang Vai and ordered east to link up with Green Battalion. Both units then headed northeast toward the Route 9-23 intersection.

By then, Junction City Junior began to experience its share of fits and starts. Following a brief appearance by communist forces, Red Battalion on 2 September took casualties and pulled back toward Tang Vai. In addition, the USAF — in part because of 48 hours of overcast conditions and in part because it was notified late of the new operational timetable — offered a tardy surge in air support.

Falling behind schedule, White and Green Battalions by 5 September belatedly arrived at the Route 9-23 intersection, which they secured without opposition. At that point, Souvanna Phouma unexpectedly lifted bombing restrictions around Moung Phine. Like the PDJ (*Plaine des Jarres*, or Plain of Jars) in the north, Moung Phine and the adjacent 9-23 junction had heretofore been exempted from aerial interdiction. This ban now lifted, USAF fighter-bombers seeded Mk-36 bomblets along the approaches to Moung Phine. White and Green Battalions then paused while Red Battalion, recovered from its earlier clash, rushed northeast to reach its sister units at the 9-23 junction. By 6 September, all three battalions were positioned for the final surge into the Moung Phine valley.

Before the RLG troops moved in, four USAF A1-Es arrived early on 7 September and, for the first time, unloaded their considerable ordnance directly onto Moung Phine. That same evening, the irregulars entered Moung Phine. Caught off-guard, the Pathet Lao abandoned troves of documents and more than 2,000 weapons, including a pair of 120mm mortars. In addition, 45 communist soldiers were taken prisoner, over 2,000 villagers were liberated, and some 163 Lao detainees were ultimately sprung from 18 prison sites in and around the town.

Within a day after seizing Moung Phine, Savannakhet Unit decided to expand its rainy season operation for a second time, now calling for an advance on PAVN's key transhipment point at Tchepone. This promised not to be easy, because Tchepone by the spring of 1969 had six PAVN infantry battalions stretched along the east and north-eastern outskirts of the town.

Despite such formidable defences, the new Junction City Junior plans called for the irregulars to secure the Route 9-91 junction (26 kilometres northeast of Moung Phine), cut Route 9 east of Tchepone, and — perhaps with a touch of fantasy — enter Tchepone itself.

Before tackling this new set of ambitious objectives, Savannakhet Unit rearranged its Moung Phine front line. On 17 September, White Battalion was replaced by the newly formed Yellow Battalion. Then Green Battalion backloaded for a rest at Nong Saphong and — to make things fair — Red Battalion followed on 28 September.

Shorthanded on the front line, Blue Battalion, fresh from a strong performance in MR 2, was introduced on 29 September to fill the vacuum left by Green and Red Battalions. Almost immediately, a PAVN assault sent Blue Battalion reeling backward. At Moung Phine, meanwhile, skittish defenders mistook a string of refugees for PAVN. Abandoning the town, they sprinted toward Moung Phalane.

Looking to salvage the situation, Savannakhet Unit the following day ordered Blue Battalion to regroup at Moung Phine. Blue did as instructed, but Yellow — living up to its name — had melted away during the night.

As this was not yet known, a company from Red Battalion was yanked from Nong Saphong and loaded into five CH-3 Knives for insertion into the Moung Phine airfield. As the lead Knife approached, PAVN gunners opened up. The CH-3E dropped hard into the brush. The crew and passengers leapt from the smoking aircraft as a flight of A-1Es arrived and attempted to neutralise the Vietnamese gunners.

Facing a tough call, the next Knife attempted to insert the rest of the company as reinforcements. As the chopper dropped low, automatic weapons fire erupted from the jungle, damaging the engine and killing one of the troops in the rear. This chopper, too, fell in a heap.

With eight Americans stranded on the ground, they returned to the second chopper wreck to salvage supplies and both M60 machine guns off the side-door mountings. They then joined the irregulars along a small defensive perimeter.

As PAVN closed from all sides, two more machine guns were removed from the choppers to help keep the Vietnamese at bay. As the afternoon wore on, the stranded crews expended the last of their M60 ammunition and were forced to turn to sidearms. With the situation growing desperate, an HH-53E Super Jolly Green Giant tried to land, only to be driven off by intense automatic weapons fire.

Soon after, PAVN mortars and rockets began to pound the runway, hitting one of the choppers and setting it aflame. Dusk approaching, Vietnamese troops closed in along the perimeter. Just as the survivors ran out of options, a flight of A-1Es rolled in, dropping CBU-19 tear gas canisters to break the PAVN ring. This allowed two HH-53s at 1830 hours to make another attempt at landing. PAVN, disoriented from the gas, withheld fire as the Americans and Lao rushed the rescue choppers and were airborne in seconds.

In hindsight, a key problem of Junction City Junior had been the operation's lack of an overall commander. The battalions, as a result, had not acted as a unified manoeuvre force. Compounding matters, Vientiane Station and the 4802nd JLD — both consumed by Kou Kiet and unwilling to support two simultaneous large-scale operations — demanded that Junction City Junior be terminated. They further instructed Savannakhet Unit not to launch another multi-battalion operation without specific prior approval.

Diamond Arrow

In southernmost Laos, RLG forces in MR 4 faced hard times. Troubles had been on the rise since late 1968, when PAVN Group 968 on 27 November opened its dry season campaign around Thateng. An otherwise typical Lao town, Thateng's importance derived from its location astride a three-way intersection. Making it even more strategic, a series of mountain ranges bracketed Thateng to the west, southwest, and southeast, putting the town at the locus of a narrow channel controlling traffic flows onto the Bolovens escarpment. Were Thateng to fall, said some skittish FAR officers, the government might have to abandon Saravane and perhaps lose the entire Bolovens Plateau.

Against this target, Group 968 maintained steady pressure through 13 December 1968, then moved in for the kill. Only the timely introduction of a USAF AC-130 kept the town from falling into Vietnamese hands.

With the New Year, a reinvigorated PAVN reopened the Thateng front. As of 2 February 1969, the town's 250 exhausted defenders were fixing to desert. Another U.S. bombing surge, and the addition of infantry reinforcements, saved the day.

Just as the future brightened, however, fatigue took its toll. During April, the entire Thateng garrison voted with its feet and pulled back toward Pakse without orders.

It was two months after the collapse of this front that irregular forces on the southern Bolovens were gearing up for a major operation. Known as Left Jab, the operation was to be the first battalion-sized SGU manoeuvre in MR 4 history. Its target was the Sihanouk Trail, which had grown since 1966 into a vast jungle road network skirting the south and southeastern edges of the Bolovens.

Serving as launch site for Left Jab was PS 38, the major guerrilla base on the southeastern Bolovens. As the planned launch date approached in late June, MR 4's second SGU battalion — appropriately titled 2nd SGU Battalion — suited up. Loaded aboard a fleet of 11 choppers, the battalion flew southeast to an open stretch of Route 110 and landed without incident.

As planned, the guerrillas clogged the rain-drenched road for three days. Then, as contact with PAVN increased sharply, the battalion evaded northeast toward Attopeu with a minimum of casualties. With Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh, the MR 4 SGU chief of staff, and Mickey Kappes, the battalion's CIA advisor, maintaining a vigil from a circling Porter, on 26 June the guerrillas reached the safety of Attopeu and concluded the operation.

Following Left Jab, MR 4's SGUs grew quiet as the rainy season wore on. Belatedly, Pakse Unit on 20 September launched Operation Diamond Arrow, an attempt to piggyback on the final phase of Junction City Junior with a combined SGU-FAR task force moving from Saravane up Route 23 into the Toumlane valley.

By the end of the first week of October — as Junction City Junior forces were retreating from Moung Phone — Diamond Arrow began with a FAR column heading east along Route 16 from Khong Sedone, while Guerrilla Battalion 30 (GB 30) swept northwest up Route 23. (In MR 4, three GBs had been formed in 1968 to serve in the static defence role, whereas SGU battalions were tasked with mobile offensive operations. An exception was made in Diamond Arrow, where GB 30 — normally responsible for static duty in the Thateng-Saravane sector — took on an offensive assignment normally reserved for SGU battalions.)

By 10 October, GB 30 had covered 38 kilometres and was nearing Toumlane. Though not part of the original operational plan, the militia-FAR task force entered the valley and swept away a handful of communist defenders. Camping at the Toumlane runway, the guerrillas waited for FAR reinforcements. When none came, the irregulars held for six days before receding toward Saravane, thus concluding MR 4's belated offensive not with a bang, but a whimper.

2

THE COMMANDO RAIDERS

Over the course of 1968 and 1969, U.S. airpower had racked up impressive statistics on the Ho Chi Minh Trail during their truck-hunting campaigns. Adding to this tally were the CIA's action teams. Although these low-tech guerrillas were the antithesis of the USAF's sophisticated fleet, Lao teams often managed to deliver results far out of proportion to their modest size and simple training. During one memorable mission in August 1969, for example, a team near the Mu Gia Pass placed demolition charges on 52 vehicles in a hidden truck park.

The key to success during these outings was the fact that the teams consisted of locals operating on their home turf. Although Savannakhet Unit had thus arrived at a recipe for success that eschewed flash and gadgetry, the Unit in late 1968 had begun going in the opposite direction as it looked to raise an elite paramilitary unit with some of the best training and technology available.

These enhanced guerrillas — coined Commando Raiders — were in theory to be game for the most challenging of raids, ambushes, prisoner snatches, bomb damage assessments, airborne pathfinder duties and cross-border missions inside North Vietnam. And, unlike the earlier Savannakhet teams, which served local, tactical objectives, these new commandos were to have a strategic dimension. "The difference between the old teams and the new Commando Raiders," offered one CIA case officer, "was the difference between seduction and rape."

The first wave of Commando Raiders consisted of 40 young, fit guerrillas selected from MR 3, and another 40 Hmong from MR 2. Both contingents were then shipped to Phitscamp.

By that time, Phitscamp had blossomed into one of Southeast Asia's foremost centres for unconventional warfare training. A sprawling facility, the number of CIA advisors had increased exponentially during the late 1960s to include experts in road-watching, communications, evasion and survival, demolitions, and medicine. There were parachute instructors — mostly ex-smoke jumpers — and, for a brief period in September 1968, an advisor for the experimental Sky Hook extraction system. Also present was a detachment of PARU and RTSF trainers.

By late 1968, even this sizable cast could not handle the growing number of students from Laos flowing through Phitscamp's doors. To assist, the Lopburi-based USSF 46th Company in January 1969 was ordered to prepare a 17-man team to support CIA efforts at Phitsanulok. During the first week of March, the requested USSF team relocated to Phitscamp. In command of the advisors was Captain Willie Card, who years earlier had been a Pincushion advisor on the Bolovens.

Once installed at Phitsanulok, Card's team developed a three-month training schedule using a program of instruction forwarded by the Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG) in South Vietnam. A few weeks later, the 80 Commando Raider candidates arrived from Laos. Receiving intensive demolitions and weapons instruction, the budding commandos were broken into 10 teams of eight, with one Special Forces advisor per team. Airborne training was given shortly before graduation in August 1969. More raider trainees arrived that fall, to include a second 60-man group from MR 3.

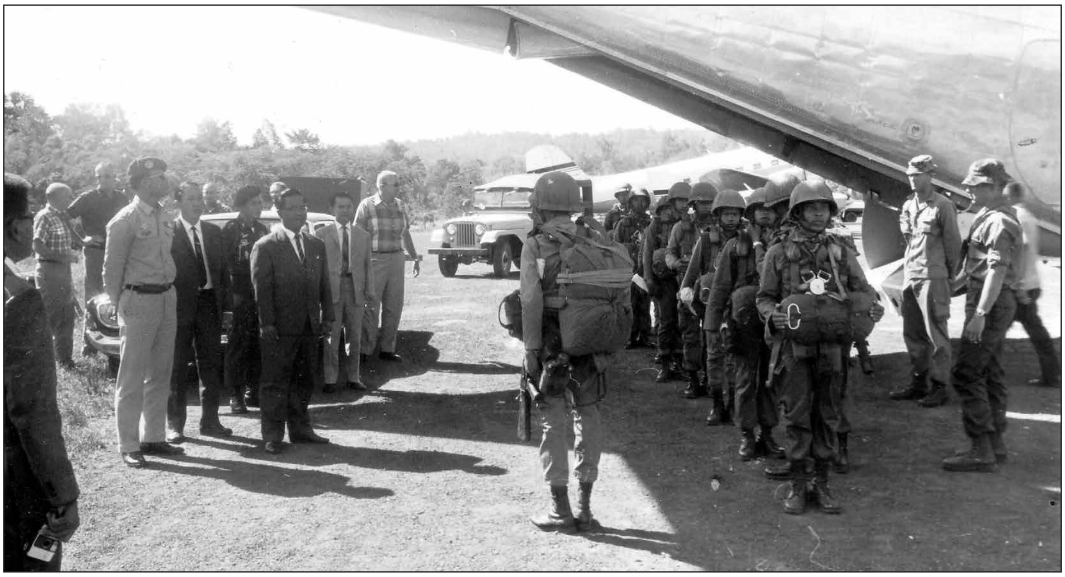
By early 1970, the first cycle of southern raiders had been repatriated to Whiskey-3, where they waited as their CIA advisors decided on the time and place to introduce the young commandos to combat. In the end, the advisors gambled on the hardest of targets: a PAVN training camp near Rao Qua, 14 kilometres northeast of the Nape Pass inside North Vietnam.

Selecting 30 commandos, the strike force — call-signed Chicken Fight — was provided five 60mm mortars and 50 rounds. To get to its target, Chicken Fight was lifted to the border aboard six Air America Bells. Picking their way onto a ridge overlooking the camp, the raiders waited until 0500 hours before dropping their mortar rounds. Leaving the training centre in flames, they then withdrew to an exfiltration point inside the Lao border.

Earning praise for their first outing, the raiders were next targeted against the Mu Gia Pass. There they were to take out a Vietnamese anti-aircraft nest or, if they could find one, one of the PAVN fuel lines that ran along the valley floor.

Outfitted in Pathet Lao fatigues and caps, the raiders loaded up at Whiskey-3 with AK-47s, M79 grenade launchers and explosives. Shuttled to Thakhek, they divided among three CH-53s and were inserted into the foothills of the Annamites. Subdividing into three smaller teams, the raiders maneuvered independently toward the northern rim of Mu Gia. After nearly three weeks of searching, they came back without having hit either target.

Returning to Whiskey-3 during the first week of April 1970, the raiders had by then built up a modicum of self-confidence. For the third Commando Raider outing — performed by half of the just graduated second Phitscamp cycle — they were targeted against



Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh (left, with beret), chief of staff of MR 4 guerrilla forces, observes MR 4 Commando Raiders undergoing airborne training at Phitscamp, 1970. (Photo courtesy Dhonnadit Sudhides)

Colonel Mok Kouvongsavanh (left) and Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh, chief of staff of MR 4 guerrilla forces, address MR 4 Commando Raiders undergoing training from US Army Special Forces instructors at Phitscamp, 1970. (Photo courtesy Dhonnadit Sudhides)

Tang Vai, which in the wake of Junction City Junior had fallen in and out of communist occupation. The 30-man raiding mission concluded without complications.

A series of further missions followed in rapid succession, including one staged from Khong Island into Cambodia. Though the results were middling, Pakse Unit had gotten wind of the project and sent 50 of their own trainees to Phitscamp. Returning to Laos by the late summer of 1970, these raiders were grouped at PS 22. Over the next few months, they were used primarily around Attopeu, occupied by PAVN forces since April.

Since PS 22 already was crowded with SGUs, the MR 4 Commando Raiders relocated in October 1970 to LS 165, recently vacated as a road-watch staging post. Along with their new home came a new advisor, Leon "Khamsing" Williamson. A veteran of two Vietnam tours as a Special Forces NCO, Khamsing had first arrived in Laos in February 1969 as part of a wave of fresh paramilitary advisors. Younger than many of the case officers who had arrived during the initial Shackley buildup, the new influx of advisors was generally more predisposed toward action operations.

Such was the case with Khamsing, who, initially charged with running road-watch operations from PS 38, started equipping his teams with phone taps, mines and claymores. Once he was reassigned to the Commando Raiders at LS 165, Khamsing unleashed teams east from the Bolovens. A favourite tactic involved loading down a raider team with heavy weapons, then lifting them to a busy section of the Trail; firing off all their ordnance, the team would be whisked away before PAVN could react.

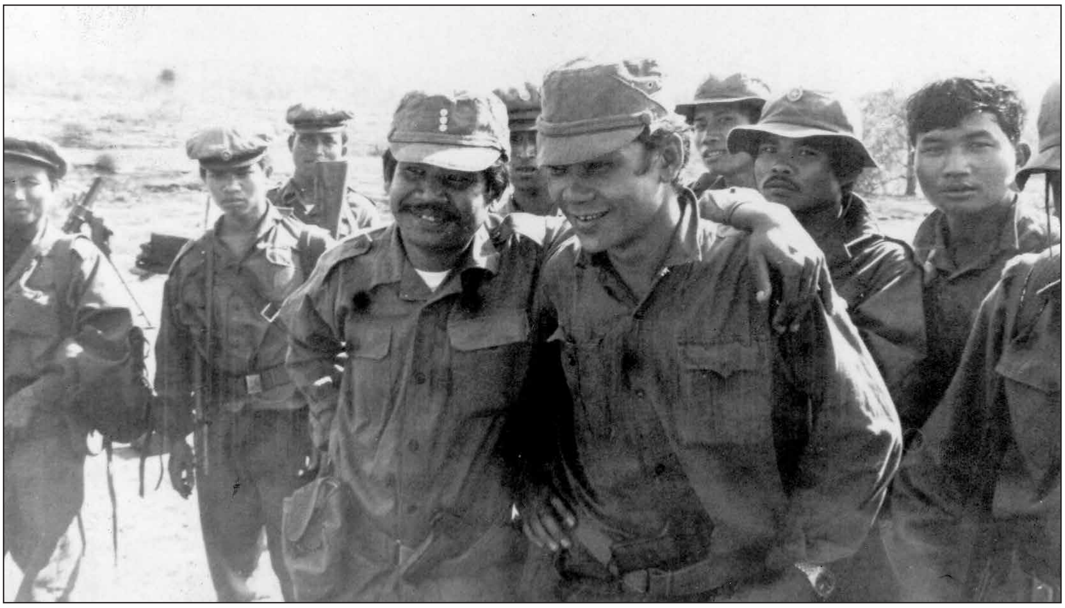
Other MR 4 missions ranged across the border into North Vietnam. One involved a 60mm mortar with its barrel wrapped in asbestos to allow for rapid firing. During another cross-border mission in late 1970, thirty MR 4 commandos took an Air America Caribou shuttle to Savannakhet, then transferred to CH-53s and were lifted to the crest of the Annamites near Mu Gia. After walking more than three days, they got close enough to a truck park — allegedly holding T-34 tanks — and fired off rounds from two 57mm recoilless rifles. They then used thermite to destroy their heavy weapons before sprinting back to their landing zone.

Recovering back at LS 165, the MR 4 commandos had little opportunity to rest before a mid-November PAVN blitz across the eastern Bolovens put their camp in jeopardy. Packing their bags, the commando resettled at PS 44, a small base in the mountains 26 kilometres north of Pakse.

A Strategic Tool?

Up at Whiskey-3, the MR 3 Commando Raider program fluctuated between 120 to 200 operatives, organised into teams custom-tailored for individual mission profiles. Although most operations fell within the region, the MR 3 Commando Raiders remained eligible for export to other parts of the country. In the fall of 1970, for example, one Savannakhet team was shipped to Long Tieng, then lifted by Bells to a landing zone near Dien Bien Phu. That mission had less than stellar results because the team was inserted at the wrong coordinates and spent several days walking in circles before being lifted out.

As a makeshift long-distance weapon, the raiders were given .30-calibre machine gun tripods with the guns replaced by four



A Commando Raider team prior to a heliborne raid against a PAVN rest camp in North Vietnam, April 1971. The team is outfitted with a mix of Pathet Lao and PAVN uniforms; weapons include AK-47s and a Makarov pistol tucked into the belt of the team leader, Lieutenant Bounheng (foreground, left). The team was ambushed soon after insertion; only five out of its 24 members managed to reach friendly lines five weeks later. (Photo courtesy Hugh Murray)

tubes containing air-to-ground rockets. Fixed to a battery, the rockets could be fired from mountaintop vantage points onto PAVN targets in the valleys below.

In time, the rocket missions grew more sophisticated as the raiders were given eight-shot pods outfitted with fat bike tires. Dropping off a squad of commandos with a pod in hand, the infiltration chopper would idle nearby while the raiders wheeled their load to the mountain's edge, fired the missiles and sprinted back for immediate extraction.

In the fall of 1970, the MR 3 raiders geared up for another raid into North Vietnam. Advising the commandos were Jim "Indian" Barber, who had earlier run road-watch and action teams in the northern panhandle, and Hugh "Greensleeves" Murray, a Georgetown University graduate and former USSF officer who had been at the CIA's Bolivia station when Che Guevara was captured and executed.

On 21 October 1970, Greensleeves watched as a dozen commandos boarded Bells and headed east. Inserted at 1600 hours just inside Quang Binh Province near the village of Lang Mo, the team had not moved far before happening on a radar-controlled antiaircraft battery protected by thick PAVN patrols. Discovered, the Lao evaded west toward the border for an emergency extraction. As the Bells returned, the bloodied commandos, less their team leader, were whisked back to Thakhek.

Following the abortive Lang Mo raid, the MR 3 raiders regrouped in December and were flown to Phitscamp for intensive retraining through January 1971. Following that, the group participated in a handful of minor actions before gearing up in April for a 24-man attack on a PAVN rest camp just inside the North Vietnamese border. An enhanced reworking of the earlier Rao Qua foray, the team, equipped with three 81mm mortars, was to be inserted in the Annamites north of Mu Gia.

Dressed as generic communist soldiers in a mix of PAVN and Pathet Lao fatigues, the commandos loaded into six Bells and flew east. Joining them was a pair of F-4 jets, another pair of A-1Es, and advisor Greensleeves in a command-and-control plane.

Landing at the same Annamite landing zone last used by the MR 4 commandos during their tank attack, the raiders jumped from the choppers and headed for the tree-line. This time, however, PAVN was waiting in ambush. In the ensuing firefight, Lieutenant Bounheng, the MR 3 Commando Raider chief doubling as team leader, quickly fell prisoner. For several days thereafter, Greensleeves trolled the border looking for a ground signal from the lost team. Not until five weeks later did the first straggler make it back to friendly lines. In all, just five men were recovered.

Following this severe loss, Savannakhet Unit gave thought to modifying one Air America Bell chopper with silenced rotors and muffled engine to aid in infiltrations. This idea never went far, however, as a single Bell was deemed insufficient to carry a full raider team with their rocket pods. Instead, the Unit began reevaluating the entire Commando Raider concept. The Savannakhet case officers increasingly realised that the Commando Raiders — flaunted as a strategic weapon — had given rise to false expectations that extended all the way back to Washington. President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger had both monitored the progress of the program, with the former pinning hopes that they might prove a significant irritant to Hanoi.

In the end, it was the changing nature of the war that spelled doom for MR 3's Commando Raiders. By late 1971, the Lao conflict had widened into a full-blown slugfest pitting PAVN divisions against guerrilla regiments. In such a heated environment, Savannakhet Unit could not afford the relatively heavy investment in advisors and training dollars needed for the pampered raiding teams. There was also the fact that by February 1972, only about half of their two-dozen operations to date could be rated a success. Reviewing this tally, the head of the Far East Branch gave the program a vote of no confidence. As a result, the MR 3 Commando Raiders ultimately went the way of the faddish Hark road-watchers before them, squeezed to the periphery as funds and manpower were reappropriated to other priorities.

Strike at Dien Bien Phu

Up in MR 2, the first 40 Commando Raider trainees had returned from Phitscamp in late 1969 with Jim "Alabama" Monroe, the same case officer who had walked across the PDJ during Kou Kiet. Posted to Pha Khao, Long Tieng Unit in mid-February 1970 handed the fresh commandos their first assignment: a cross-border strike against a PAVN depot and rear divisional headquarters in the infamous Dien Bien Phu valley. Ironically, this target was opposed by Vientiane Station Chief Larry Devlin (who feared it would prompt retaliation in MR 2), but was being staged at the insistence of both Nixon and Kissinger.

The commando strike on Dien Bien Phu would be noteworthy for its ambitious scale. Some 32 Hmong raiders would be used, choppered to their target aboard six Air America Bells (plus one spare). Given the risk involved, the seven chopper crews, when briefed by the embassy's senior CIA air operations advisor on 21

February, were required to sign a secrecy form; they were also forbidden to carry wallets on the mission, lest they be shot down with identification.

On the following day, the helicopters arrived at Pha Khao. There the commandos were waiting at the airfield, their PAVN uniforms and AK-47s giving them all the looks of a North Vietnamese platoon. With them were early two-shot versions of the rocket pods later used along the Trail. The batteries and rockets were carried separately for fear of static electricity igniting them during flight.

Onloading while the choppers idled, the strike force was airborne in minutes. In the lead was Air America Captain Phil Goddard, skimming the treetops as co-pilot Nikki Fillipi navigated a course from the left seat. The rest of the aircraft tagged close behind while maintaining radio silence. Their transponders had even been removed out of concern that energy they emitted would be detected by PAVN radar near Dien Bien Phu.

Refueling en route from fuel bladders previously airdropped at an airstrip northeast of Luang Prabang, the armada flawlessly picked its way to a landing zone west of Dien Bien Phu, just inside the Laos border. From there, the commandos turned in a laudable performance, slipping close enough to their target to direct a volley of rockets at the PAVN headquarters below. Radio intercepts later indicated that the projectiles struck during an officer's meeting.

On 24 February, the Bell fleet retraced its steps and collected the raiders. The Air America crews were later awarded cash bonuses for their contribution to the mission's success.

During early May 1970, the Pha Khao raiders were given two weeks of 60mm mortar training. This was in preparation for their next outing, an attack on the North Vietnamese village of Moung Sen. Located astride Route 7, Moung Sen since the 1968 bombing halt had been exempt from U.S. air attack, a factor that prompted PAVN to use the village as a major depot for war materials destined for the PDJ. According to the latest intelligence, these materials included a shipment of tanks; the commandos were to destroy these armoured vehicles before they had a chance to leave Moung Sen.

On 23 May, 21 raiders dressed as PAVN soldiers gathered at Pha Khao airfield with four mortars and some M72 LAW rockets. Air America Bells soon materialised from Long Tieng and shuttled the men to a border landing zone north of Route 7. Once on the ground, the team stole into North Vietnam undetected. Within three days, however, Vietnamese border patrols stumbled on a fresh commando bivouac site; a manhunt immediately ensued. On the morning of 29 May, PAVN patrols caught up with two commandos. Abandoning a 60mm mortar, both raiders managed to disappear into the jungle.

Late the following afternoon, PAVN patrols cornered the bulk of the commando team. The raiders fought back for two hours, then managed to split up and melt into the jungle. Expanding their dragnet, the North Vietnamese beat the bush over the next four days; for their pains, they managed to kill seven commandos. Four others were able to evade toward Moung Moc, where an Air America Bell lifted the emaciated raiders back to Pha Khao. The remainder of the team was taken prisoner and shipped to Hanoi, where some of them were held in detention until 1987.

Despite this setback, a new team of a dozen Commando Raiders were back at Moung Sen in July. This time they managed to destroy four tanks with LAW rockets and successfully exfiltrate. In September, another dozen raiders returned to the village and killed six trucks. Finally, in October, 24 commandos shelled Moung Sen's resident Pathet Lao broadcasting station.

Up to that time, the MR 2 Commando Raider program had showed promise. But like their southern counterparts, the Pha Khao-based raiders proved an expensive investment that failed to deliver on its promised strategic dimension. As with the MR 3 program, too, misunderstandings arose over what could realistically be expected from the commandos. Moreover, by late 1970, Long Tieng Unit, like Savannakhet, was busy raising irregular GMs. The MR 2 Commando Raiders, as a result, began to walk back their flashy special operations mandate and assume a new lease on life as an airborne pathfinder unit for the quasi-conventional guerrilla regiments.

3

PAYBACK

By the end of September 1969, Vang Pao was in a quandary. Against all expectations, his troops had cleaned house, sending the communists fleeing east from the PDJ toward the North Vietnamese border. Now, with so much liberated territory on hand, he deferred to the king and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma for his next move. In a state of euphoria, both leaders were explicit in their marching orders: hold the PDJ.

Such enthusiasm emanating from both Luang Prabang and the prime minister's office was completely in line with the hardnosed sentiments of the new U.S. ambassador, McMurtrie "Mac" Godley. A Yale graduate, Godley arrived in Laos in mid-June 1969. A veteran of the Cold War paramilitary skirmishes in the Congo, Godley was a tough foot soldier, handpicked by the White House as one willing to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty.

With Godley offering encouragement, Vang Pao looked to carry his Kou Kiet momentum into October 1969. Along the northwestern PDJ, in mid-month an ADC company seized Phou Khout, the serrated peak whose capture had eluded the government since 1964.

Southeast of Phou Khout, GM 21 and a FAR battalion consolidated their hold over Phou Keng and Phou San, and then edged northeast toward the Route 71-74 intersection. Along the southern end of the PDJ, GM 23 surged eastward from Xieng Khouangville. By 8 October, elements of the regiment had covered 32 kilometres and established a post overlooking PAVN's as-yet incomplete Route 72 infiltration corridor. This would mark the easternmost territory liberated under Kou Kiet.

In the centre of the PDJ, GM 22 consolidated gains around Khang Khay, then pushed northeast along Route 7 to link up with the irregulars holding the Route 7-71 junction. Many food and weapons caches were uncovered along the way, making Kou Kiet, in terms of war booty, probably the single greatest anti-communist victory by any army in the Second Indochina War up to that time. From 6 August through the end of October 1969, the operation netted nearly six million rounds of ammunition, more than 6,400 weapons, 25 tanks, 113 vehicles, 202,000 gallons of fuel, and enough stockpiled food for all communist forces in northern Laos for five days. By comparison, the total number of artillery rounds, mortars, and rockets captured in Kou Kiet exceeded the amount of similar ammunition expended by communist forces (both PAVN and Viet Cong) in South Vietnam during either 1967 or 1968, or through the end of October 1969.

Offsetting this success, however, was danger on the horizon. Signs of this first became visible in early September when U.S. reconnaissance planes confirmed a buildup of communist forces along Route 7 near the border, and another close to Sam Neua town.

In reaction, the USAF began to drop a range of sensors and ordnance along the border. PAVN, not surprisingly, kept off the roads. But the North Vietnamese were far from being counted out. Acting as if rainy season setbacks had never occurred, General Nguyen Vo Giap, the North Vietnamese Minister of Defence, issued orders on 13 September for an upcoming dry season offensive in MR 2. Given the day and month of the order, the operation was named Campaign 139.

Under the command of General Vu Lap, a member of the Tai tribal minority with little formal education but a sharp sense of discipline, Campaign 139 got off to a quick start. Within 24 hours after Giap's directive, advance elements of the 141st Regiment/312th Division were congregating near Nong Het. Two weeks later, a private from the regiment was captured while attacking Pakse SGUs holding Phou Nok Kok.

Building on these opening shots, Hanoi on 25 October added more teeth to its campaign, allocating to Vu Lap the two remaining regiments of the 312th Division (the 165th and 209th), the 316th Division (by then fully rested and refitted), the 866th Independent Regiment, armour, artillery, engineers and four commando battalions. Of these, the 316th Division and support units were to infiltrate along Route 7; the 312th Division and 866th Independent Regiment would approach along Route 72.

Though the bulk of this force had yet to cross the North Vietnamese border, enough troops had reached Phou Nok Kok by month's end to probe the front lines twice weekly. As pressure increased, Vang Pao on 6 November called together his field commanders for a strategy session. The general used the opportunity to lobby his CIA advisors for additional weaponry, to include more M16 rifles, 105mm and 155mm howitzers, armoured cars and M41 medium tanks.

The CIA, hardly able to fulfil the general's entire shopping list, did make good on some items. Back in September 1969, in fact, 106 Hmong students had been dispatched to Kokethiem, Thailand, for two months of 155mm howitzer training; upon completion in November, they were dispatched to the western PDJ airstrip at Ban Thang to take command of four rehabilitated 155mm tubes salvaged from Moung Soui.

Also discussed at the 6 November meeting was a restructuring of the PDJ defences into three primary task forces: one at the Route 7-71 junction; another at Xieng Khouangville; and the third, a general reserve at the old French runway in the central PDJ (commonly known by its Air America airfield designation, Lima 22).

Before this plan could be fully implemented, PAVN initiated a series of spoiling attacks to throw Vang Pao on the defensive. First to feel the pinch was Xieng Khouangville. Holding fast during a 9 November attack by the 165th Regiment, the town's resident FAR defenders fled during a repeat encounter eight days later. A counterattack near month's end, using captured PT-76 tanks and the recently arrived 155mm howitzers with Hmong crews, returned it to tenuous government control.

On the northern front, a similar tale unfolded as the North Vietnamese probed both Phou Nok Kok and Phou Pheung. Against the latter, a concerted push by a single battalion from the 312th Division's 141st Regiment on 29 November sent the mountain's defenders — a mix of ADC and FAR — reeling south. Being shorthanded, Vang Pao put off consideration of a counterattack until a later date.

On 3 December, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma made a triumphant tour of the PDJ. Vang Pao, however, could hardly feel satisfied with the tactical situation in MR 2. The dry season, after all, was nearly at hand and severe attrition had forced the Hmong into a numbers game they could hardly win. Between 1966 and 1969, the RLG had been losing 7,000 men a year, about equal to the annual growth in eligible male candidates for military service. Far more critical were the percentages for SGU forces, which accounted for 13 percent of RLG strength but 70 percent of total RLG casualties.

As an entire generation of middle-aged Hmong males fast disappeared, manpower had become Vang Pao's most precious commodity. Of equal concern was the fact that the USAF's massive air support campaign was proving a double-edged sword. During the Kou Kiet offensive, the general and his troops had grown addicted

Defending the gains of Operation Kou Kiet, Case officers Jim "Swamp Rat" Atkins and Wil Greene patrol at the base of Phou Nok Kok, November 1969. (Photo courtesy James Atkins)

CIA technicians Dan Hogan (right) and "Joe" being escorted by MR 4 guerrillas while installing vehicle sensors at the foot of Phou Nok Kok, November 1969. In the rear with light pants is Pakse case officer Wil Greene. Long Tieng Unit wanted the sensors to detect whether PAVN truck traffic was approaching the Kou Kiet frontlines on the PDJ. (Photo courtesy Jim Adkins)

to U.S. air sorties, becoming in effect the world's only guerrilla army with air superiority. Remarked a senior CIA official, "All [Vang Pao] has to say is 'Kill all the enemy here,' and it is done."

As Vang Pao increasingly pinned his hopes on airpower, USAF pilots were being frustrated in their attempts to prevent PAVN from infiltrating westward toward the PDJ. This was because Hmong troops had ventured so far east during Kou Kiet that they had encroached into zones originally designated for mine seeding. Fearful of inflicting friendly casualties, U.S. pilots had found it impossible to maintain an interdiction buffer.

As more PAVN crossed the border, Campaign 139 entered into higher gear. Topping the campaign's hit list was Phou Nok Kok. Since that mountain's capture in August, it had served as a crucial vantage point commanding the entrance onto the PDJ proper, "the cork in the bottle," according to one CIA officer. In late November, the peak's original defenders — MR 4's 2nd SGU Battalion — finished their tour and were replaced by another Pakse formation, 3rd SGU Battalion.

Even before these new troops had a chance to fully settle into their new surroundings, Dac Cong commandos struck on the night of 2 December. Hitting from three directions, the sappers lobbed more than 300 mortar rounds onto the ridge, and then assaulted with Bangalore torpedoes. Overwhelmed, the Pakse guerrillas withered, peeling off the sides of Phou Nok Kok as dawn broke.

Just as the Dac Cong commandos were ready to claim their prize, however, the battalion's CIA advisor, Wilbur "Black Lion" Greene, stepped in. Greene, a former USSF captain and one of the few black CIA officers in Laos, grabbed a radio and began directing airstrikes through the morning. Saved by airpower, the SGU reclaimed its trenches.

For the next week, PAVN contact dwindled. Taking advantage of the lull, a combined force of FAR and ADC militia — liberally supported by Hmong-operated PT-76 tanks and 155mm howitzers — on 4 December successfully re-stormed Phou Pheung, then pushed east into the village of Lat Bouak astride the Route 71-74 intersection.

Though heartened by the Phou Pheung performance, Long Tieng Unit recognised that communist pressure was bound to increase. In preparation for the inevitable, the CIA on 12 December finalised a plan for a phased fighting retreat off the plain. According to this plan, Phou Nok Kok would represent the first line of defence, followed by four lines leading back to the western edge of the PDJ. In addition, a mobile reserve consisting of three FAR/Neutralist battalions would be concentrated near Lima 22.

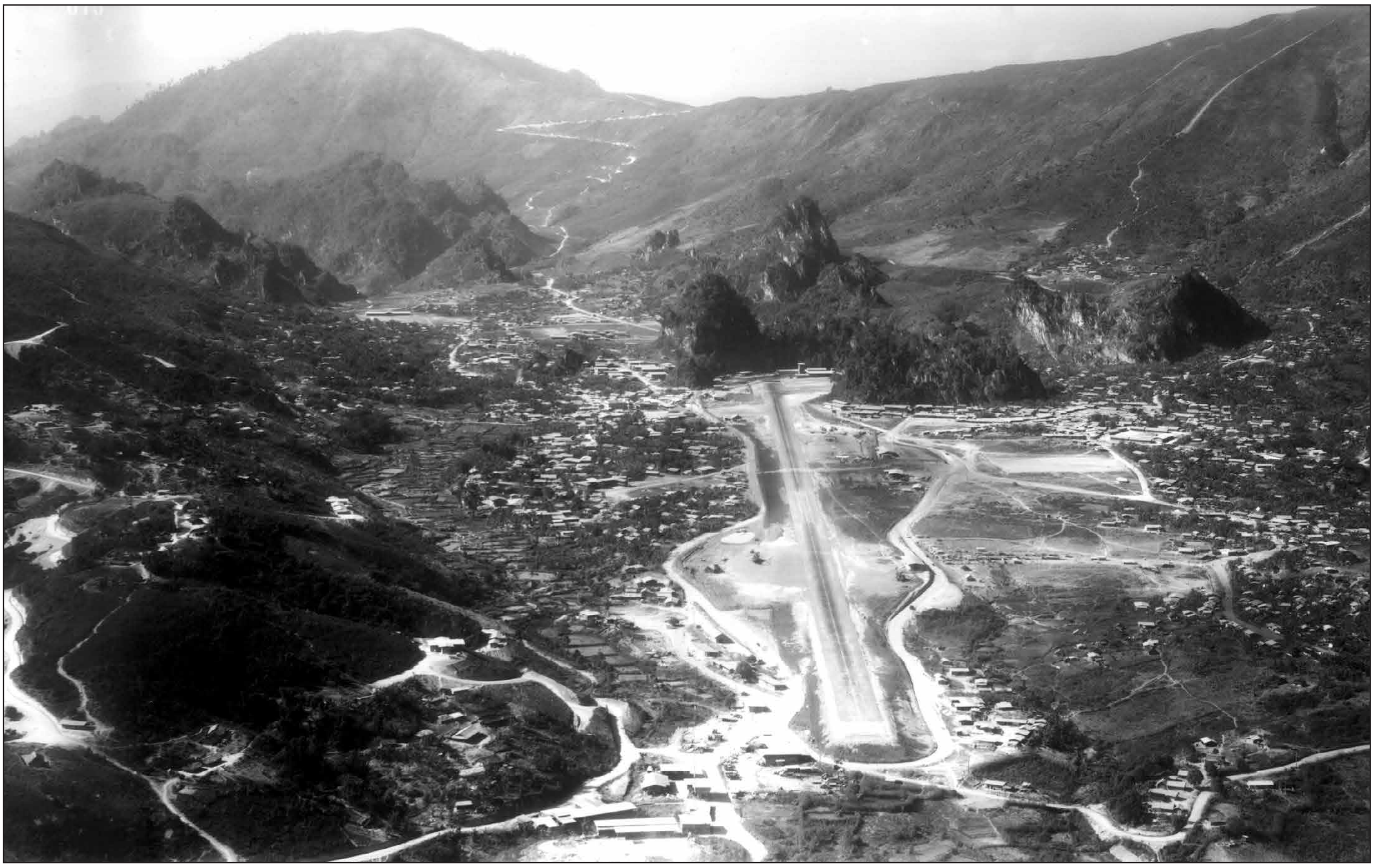
Tactically sound and offering the best strategy for the government forces to trade territory for heavy PAVN casualties, the plan was forwarded to Vang Pao for his approval. The general, however, was anything but cooperative. A guerrilla warrior by training and instinct, Vang Pao did not include staged withdrawals in his repertoire of irregular military tactics. Moreover, he had outfought the Vietnamese to gain control of the PDJ — earning praise far and wide in the process — and he was not prepared to discuss retreat as a fait accompli. The Hmong general rejected the plan outright.

As predicted, communist pressure returned by mid-December with a vengeance. This time, Dac Cong commandos on the night of 17 December took the fight directly against Lima 22. The attack force, it turned out, was composed of rookie commandos slapped together the previous month and rushed into Laos one week earlier. Still, the two untested companies managed to spike a howitzer and destroy three captured PT-76 tanks during their lightning raid — an enviable first tally for a band of novices.

Elsewhere, PAVN's 316th Division stabbed at GM 21, which had moved into the hills immediately northeast and southeast of the Route 7-71 junction. Of equal concern, aerial photography revealed that Route 6 was again motorable to at least five kilometres south of Nakhang; if it were completed to Ban Ban, PAVN trucks would be able to avoid the heavily interdicted Route 7.

Against these developments, Vang Pao stubbornly refused to compromise on plans for a phased withdrawal. He did agree, however, to evacuate the vestigial RLG presence from Sam Neua concentrated around Houei Tong Ko.

In the midst of the Sam Neua evacuation, PAVN launched harassment probes across the Kou Kiet front. Tasting blood, PAVN increased the tempo of battle during the second week of January. This included a Dac Cong night assault against Phou Nok Kok from two directions. Here two factors favoured the North Vietnamese commandos. First, the RLG defenders, Pakse's 1st SGU Battalion, had recently rotated north to assume defence of the ridgeline and was still unfamiliar with the terrain. Second, bad weather was keeping airpower circling impotently above the clouds.



Long Tieng, the headquarters for paramilitary operations in Military Region 2. The road to Sam Thong weaves up Skyline Ridge in the rear; Skyline One is to the left of the road and Skyline Two to the right. (Photo courtesy William Ritchie)

Though disadvantaged, the MR 4 battalion managed to deflect the initial Dac Cong thrust. Over the following day, however, a second commando prong scaled Phou Nok Kok's northern face and pushed onto the ridgeline's highest point. Slinging mortars and flamethrowers to the crest, PAVN troops fired down onto the remaining battalion outposts. Bloodied and exhausted, the battalion commander late on 12 January gathered the remainder of his men and walked off the mountain.

As an attempt to retake Phou Nok Kok was deemed too costly, Vang Pao instead directed reinforcements into the narrow Nong Pet chokepoint containing the Route 7-71 junction. Already positioned on the intersection were Hmong ADC, GM 21's BG 201, and Savannakhet's lone SGU contribution, Brown Battalion. To these were added GM 22's BG 204 and a single FAR battalion. Finally, an armoured supply convoy snaked its way northeast from Lima 22 and arrived at the road junction one day before month's end.

Desperate for more reinforcements, Vang Pao held out a cup to other military regions. By that late hour, however, MR commanders — never overly generous in the best of times — had grown weary of sacrificing bodies to the Long Tieng meatgrinder. A sole exception was Pakse's General Phasouk, who agreed to dispatch yet another of his SGU battalions, this despite having had one recently dismembered at Phou Nok Kok. On 22 January, Pakse's 2nd SGU Battalion, on its second rotation north, arrived at Lima 22. Since its previous roost atop Phou Nok Kok was now in communist hands, the battalion was instead dispatched to Xieng Khouangville, where it established static positions alongside a Neutralist battalion.

Thirsting for still more reinforcements, Vang Pao found help from amongst the sparse Hmong villages that dotted northwestern Laos. Cobbling together tribal volunteers from the Xieng Lom vicinity, on 22 January a composite SGU battalion was shipped by C-123 to Lima 22. These untested troops were quickly marched northeast, where they joined the thin defensive line between Khang Khay and Lat Bouak.

With these additions on hand, January quietly gave way to February. Knowing that a full-blown PAVN offensive lay just weeks, if not days, ahead, Vang Pao approved a massive refugee lift from the southern PDJ. As this was taking place, on the night of 11 February two Dac Cong battalions infiltrated the Route7-71 junction and lobbed tear gas rounds into the RLG trenches. As discipline collapsed, Savannakhet's Brown Battalion was soon in flight toward Lima 22. The rest of the garrison gave an equally uninspired performance, allowing Vietnamese infantry to seize control of the road junction the next morning.

With the gateway to the PDJ now fully in its hands, Hanoi shifted its sights to the heart of the plain. Against this, Vang Pao's weak response on 13 February was to order those troops fleeing from the vicinity of the Route 7-71 junction to implement a quasi-fighting withdrawal, while at the same time making a defensive line midway across the plain extending from Phou Keng down to Xieng Khouangville.

Centred along this new front was MR 2's forward command base, Lima 22. Looking more like a U.S. firebase than anything out of Vang Pao's guerrilla past, Lima 22 carried all the trappings of conventionality. Alongside the runway in refurbished French houses were FAR and Neutralist tactical headquarters, while 300 meters southwest sat the MR 2 SGU liaison centre. An earthen-topped brick building served as a bunker. Elsewhere on the site were depots, a motor pool and a tank park with captured PT-76s; spread around the barbed-wire perimeter was a series of textbook-perfect howitzer and 4.2-inch mortar pits.

Although Lima 22 had already held in the face of several light Dac Cong probes, on 15 February PAVN returned with 122mm rockets to soften the approach as its tanks and armoured cars moved southwest past Khang Khay. Fortunately for the defenders of Lima 22, only days earlier CIA personnel had laced likely avenues of approach with antitank mines. Thus, when four PT-76s arrived on the foggy night of 17 February, all were left twisted and charred by daybreak.

On the same night that PAVN tanks were trying to overrun Lima 22, B-52 bombers for the first time were unleashed in northern Laos. Flying too high to be heard from the ground, a trio of bombers rained streams of bombs off the eastern end of the PDJ against a PAVN forward headquarters. Over the next 48 hours, the B-52 gamble appeared to have paid off. No major communist activity was reported in MR 2 for the whole of 19 February.

Taking advantage of the lull, Vang Pao toured Lima 22 to encourage his frontline troops. He then rushed back to Long Tieng to receive the king of Laos; both were scheduled to fly to Lima 22 the next day to hand out field promotions to FAR and Neutralist troops. On 20 February, however, the king's scheduled promotion ceremony was abruptly cancelled when PAVN 122mm rockets began to hit Lima 22. A ground assault followed, but the defenders held.

Several hours later, PAVN returned with four tanks as dawn was about to break on 21 February. This time, the garrison collapsed in short order and the stragglers headed west. In rapid succession, outposts fell around the plain. Confronted with such chaos, Vang Pao on 22 February ordered Xieng Khouangville abandoned.

With the North Vietnamese having taken Lima 22 by force and Xieng Khouangville by forfeit, U.S. intelligence analysts forecast three possibilities for PAVN's next move. First, it could consolidate its hold over the PDJ. Second, it could move against Long Tieng. Last, it could hit Moung Soui, and then continue past to the Sala Phou Khoun road junction, as it had attempted the previous summer.

Initially, Hanoi appeared to choose the third option. Even before PAVN began to apply pressure with its 174th Regiment, Moung Soui's defences had started to crumble. By 22 February, all that protected its runway was a company of Hmong guerrillas. Two days later, Savannakhet's Brown Battalion, which had already run from the Route 7-71 junction and Lima 22, streamed through Moung Soui with reports of approaching Vietnamese. Their fear was contagious: by that afternoon, the base was empty.

With the fall of Moung Soui, all the Kou Kiet advantages from the summer of 1969 had been reversed. And though these losses had not come with heavy friendly casualties, Vang Pao, prone to wide mood swings, had sunk into deep depression; on cue, the rest of his Hmong army began to sulk.

By contrast, PAVN was on a roll. While its logistical tail struggled to catch up, the North Vietnamese prepared — for the first time — to bring their dry season offensive south and southwest of the PDJ. Taking the lead were the 165th Regiment/312th Division and 866th Independent Regiment, both of which rushed past Xieng Khouangville to put the heat on MR 4's 2nd SGU Battalion blocking at Khang Kho.

As the Pakse guerrillas held through the first week of March — thanks in large part to USAF jets laying a ring of air-dropped mines — both PAVN regiments merely went around Khang Kho and approached Phou Phasai, the commanding ridgeline midway between the PDJ and Long Tieng. There the Vietnamese paused in the face of lurking bands of Hmong troops that had retreated southwest off the plain. From Moung Soui, a second PAVN prong from the 174th Regiment headed south toward Ban Na.

As at Phou Phasai, Ban Na was garrisoned by an assortment of irregulars, including the novice contingent from Xieng Lom. Like Phou Phasai, too, this ragtag assembly showed surprising fortitude and managed to block the Vietnamese from advancing farther for the time being.

Meantime, the PAVN 148th Regiment, after spearheading the drive across the PDJ, slipped off the plain and headed southwest along an improved trail leading into the Tha Tham Bleung valley. It finally came to rest in the vicinity of Phou Long Mat, a key mountain overlooking Tha Tham Bleung to the north.

As the situation looked increasingly dire, Vang Pao began contemplating solutions to get the Hmong out of the war. On at least three previous occasions, the general had threatened a mass migration of the Hmong to Sayaboury Province or Thailand. By the second week of March 1970, Vang Pao dusted off his migration plan and again was calling for a mass evacuation of civilians from Sam Thong and Long Tieng. This sparked contingency plans on 13 March for a wholescale Hmong airlift to Sayaboury.

Before these plans had time to be approved and implemented, the 316th Division on 15 March ordered a Dac Cong company to hit Phou Phasai and an infantry battalion to occupy the Tha Tham Bleung valley. Next, a company of Dac Cong and another company of infantrymen from the PAVN 148th Regiment arrived at the Sam Thong perimeter. An evacuation order was sounded, resulting in an emergency lift of civilians, wounded and USAID personnel on 17 March. Left alone, Hmong troops delayed for a day before running south to Long Tieng, leaving PAVN free to enter Sam Thong and torch half the town, including its 200-bed hospital.

With Sam Thong gone, little remained between PAVN and Vang Pao's Long Tieng nerve centre. In theory, airpower was to play a crucial role in throwing back the North Vietnamese. However, since 6 March the skies over MR 2 had been thick with rain clouds. Compounding the overcast, early March was the slash-and-burn time in the Hmong agricultural calendar; the resultant haze made for some of the worst flying weather in Vang Pao's recollection.

Thus deprived of air support, and with reports of North Vietnamese elements approaching to within five kilometres to the northeast, three-quarters of the Long Tieng population was evacuated on 18 March. CIA personnel, set to join the exodus later the same day, spent the early morning burning classified documents and destroying ciphers. Two of the CIA reports officers at the base composed their first-ever Aardwolf, the name given to a special cable notifying headquarters of an imminent momentous event.

That noon, Vang Pao returned to Long Tieng from a visit to the FAR General Staff in Vientiane where he had gone to plead his case for more reinforcements. So bad was the general's shortage of trained personnel that he had been forced to pull two companies of fresh Hmong recruits training in the Long Tieng valley and place them atop Skyline Ridge, the high ground dominating Long Tieng's northern horizon. Apart from these raw companies, the only other available units at the base were the military band and a 28-man T-28 ground crew.

Just as the battle seemed lost, the cavalry arrived. Throughout the afternoon, transport planes landed at Long Tieng, packed tight with more than 300 troops in olive battle dress devoid of insignia. The contingent — composed of RTA regulars from the Artillery Centre at Kokethiem — was codenamed SR 9, a continuation of the earlier numbered series of Thai artillery contingents stationed at Moung Soui.

Dispatching Thai regulars to Long Tieng had been a controversial undertaking. The Thai, for their part, were willing to secretly dispatch

PAVN briefly seized Skyline Ridge, overlooking Long Tieng, in March 1970; however, Hmong guerrillas quickly retook the summit. Victorious Hmong, armed with M1 Garands, M1 Carbines and a 3.5-inch rocket launcher, pose next to North Vietnamese casualties. (Photo courtesy Doug Swanson)

an artillery battalion. Foggy Bottom, however, resisted, saying it was an unnecessary escalation. Nixon and Kissinger, by contrast, supported the idea, noting that a refusal would panic Souvanna Phouma and send doubts to the Thai about America's commitment to its Southeast Asian allies. Ultimately, Nixon prevailed and the Thai offer was accepted. SR 9 immediately began setting up artillery positions on the rise immediately southwest of the Long Tieng valley.

With the Thai holding down the fort, a depressed Vang Pao returned to the safety of Vientiane that evening. Nearly all Americans joined the general, save for the CIA's Hog Daniels and Jim "Alabama" Monroe, the veteran from the Kou Kiet march across the PDJ.

The next morning, Vang Pao was back at Long Tieng. But he was not alone. Rising to the occasion, CIA units from other military regions had thrown together irregular reinforcements and had them winging into MR 2's besieged headquarters. From Nam Yu came the first 79 men from what promised to be a full SGU battalion. From Savannakhet came more than 500 guerrillas drawn from Red and Green Battalions (both units were soon brought to strength). Phasouk, too, added a planeload of troops. Meanwhile, other units, like Pakse's 2nd SGU Battalion, made their way back to Long Tieng and were deployed along Skyline Ridge.

On the night of 20 March, a handful of PAVN troops pushed their way onto Skyline One, the name given to the western half of the ridgeline overlooking the base. In addition, 122mm rockets for the first time pelted the Long Tieng valley, and a 20-man sapper team penetrated onto its runway, only to be driven off before serious damage was done. A major ground assault, however, never materialised.

By mid-morning of 21 March, Skyline One was swept of Vietnamese and the Long Tieng runway was reopened for air traffic. The weather, moreover, was finally clearing after several weeks of marathon cloud cover. With T-28 operations having been shifted into Long Tieng itself, a visibly inspired Vang Pao was on the flight-line helping load bombs.

Just as optimism began to take root, the security situation on 22 March deteriorated. As clouds returned overhead, a volley of 122mm rockets slammed into the valley. That night, North Vietnamese troops once again probed Skyline One. Before the PAVN troops could pull off a more serious attack, a lumbering USAF C-130 made a pass over Sam Thong and dropped a massive steel barrel affixed to a wooden cradle. As the barrel cleared the aircraft, two static lines cut the webbing around it and deployed a triangular parachute to stabilise its descent. When the barrel was one meter from the ground, a detonating rod sent a charge into the slurry explosive that filled the tank, igniting a blast that levelled a mountaintop and sent a shock wave that incapacitated PAVN troops for several hundred meters around. This, the USAF's first combat use of the massive BLU-82 bomb, was later credited by Vang Pao with preventing a second major PAVN push on Long Tieng.

His mood being a virtual barometer needle, Vang Pao was again in good spirits on 23 March, a day marked by heavy rains that cleared away some of the cloud cover. At 0100 hours the next morning, however, Dac Cong commandos managed to edge back onto Skyline One, this time knocking out the all-important TACAN that was helping direct airstrikes. Down in the Long Tieng valley, the entire Nam Yu 1st SGU Battalion — a patchwork of hill tribe guerrillas thrown together just days before deployment in MR 2 — was issued M16 rifles and told to retake Skyline. With heavy gunship support, the hill tribesmen — enticed with a daily $1 combat per diem — quickly evicted the North Vietnamese.

The impressive showing of the Nam Yu guerrillas turned heads. That included Vang Pao, who immediately sent them charging north with the mission of retaking Sam Thong. For two days the Nam Yu contingent inched northward. The weather was improving, air support was increasing, and, as a result, more bombs were crashing down on the PAVN defenders. Subject to that kind of attention, the North Vietnamese on 26 March slowly abandoned Sam Thong for the relative safety of the surrounding jungle. The Nam Yu irregulars, unaware of the communist pull-out, sat idle in the hills south of Sam Thong until a CASI Pilatus Porter landed at the town's deserted runway. Emerging from the plane, Tony Poe, the senior officer at Nam Yu, managed to encourage and cajole his battalion into taking its target.

Once Sam Thong was in friendly hands, Vang Pao announced that the immediate threat to Long Tieng was over. Taking the general at his word, civilians began to stream home. Morale among the MR 2 guerrillas improved rapidly, as did the weather.

Still, significant PAVN pockets remained southwest of the PDJ, bolstered at the last moment by the arrival of the 165th Regiment between Ban Na and Phou Long Mat. Since this was a choice vantage point for heavy weapons aimed at Long Tieng, the communists clearly had to be swept from that vicinity. Accordingly, on 29 March, Vang Pao began to redeploy his forces north from Long Tieng. Over the following days, guerrillas from MR 1, 2, 3 and 4 entered the fray, eventually pushing the Vietnamese off of several key hills.

Jim Glerum visits the guerrilla base at Bouamlong, 1969. In August 1968, Bill Lair, the patriarch behind the MR 2 paramilitary program, departed Udorn for training at the Army War College and eventual reassignment to Bangkok. His deputy, Pat Landry, was elevated to head of the 4802nd JLD, while Glerum, who had a strong background in air support for covert operations, was named the deputy head. (Photo courtesy James Glerum)

With a modest buffer secured, Vang Pao could breathe easier knowing that the monsoon rains were a little more than a month away. PAVN, consulting the same calendar, suddenly turned gun-shy. Perhaps sensing that Route 72 would get washed out during the rainy season, and perhaps overly cautious about repeating the embarrassing reverses of 1969, General Vu Lap quietly began pulling back the majority of his forces to North Vietnam, leaving behind only scattered pockets of resistance between Long Tieng and the PDJ. With that, on 25 April Hanoi officially drew Campaign 139 to a close.

Over the course of Campaign 139, PAVN had introduced a combined-arms blitz — armour, infantry, Dac Cong, engineers, heavy weapons — never before seen in Laos. More disturbing for the defenders of MR 2 was PAVN's seeming desire to forgo its traditional monsoon hibernation and instead follow a rainy season strategy of keeping pockets of resistance southwest of the PDJ, firmly holding the plain itself, and launching a small offensive against the only RLG target of note remaining northeast of the plain: the garrison at Bouamlong.

Bouamlong, a Hmong ADC outpost dating back to the Momentum days, was noteworthy for its longevity. Other garrisons had come and gone, but Bouamlong's survival record was unblemished. This was partially because the village and its runway were sheltered in a protective bowl, each of the highpoints honeycombed with bunkers and trenches. It was also due to its crusty, competent chieftain, Major Cher Pao Moua. His loyal ADC, though numbering only a few hundred, had been more than up to the task of both defending the base and launching occasional forays south toward the Route 7-71 junction.

Largely spared from concerted PAVN attack, Bouamlong was suddenly thrust into the limelight on 23 February 1970 when the North Vietnamese laid siege to the base. Facing only Cher Pao Moua's ADC, the initial PAVN advance carried nearly to the outer wire before being stopped cold.

Two months later, as PAVN activity near Long Tieng subsided, pressure around Bouamlong increased sharply. Employing the 141st Regiment of the 312th Division, on 10 April the communists overran a satellite outpost and started shelling the Bouamlong bowl. In addition, Dac Cong managed to tunnel into the trenches along part of the inner perimeter.

For the defenders, a difficult April was followed by more of the same in May. From MR 4, an ad hoc battalion was rushed north to stiffen the line. They arrived at a garrison awash in war debris. Nearly 6,000 people were cramped together on the valley floor, only a few hundred of whom were soldiers. Resupply parachute canopies were everywhere, carpeting the hillsides and being salvaged as housing material. The stench of North Vietnamese bodies floated down from the perimeter. Not surprisingly, the Pakse contingent balked at the assignment and began clamouring to return home. A FAR battalion from MR 5 proved more robust, and the base held as the rainy season began.

Down at Long Tieng, meanwhile, by the late spring of 1970 Vang Pao's Hmong forces were thoroughly punch-drunk after having been on the line since the previous summer. At the same time, those irregulars on loan from outside MR 2 — who never had their hearts fully in the fight from the start — were looking for tickets home following the intense combat of March. Case in point was Nam Yu's 2nd SGU Battalion. Like its predecessor — the Nam Yu 1st SGU Battalion, which had retaken Sam Thong — the 2nd SGU Battalion was a composite unit, bringing together two companies of heavily tattooed Lu tribesmen, one of Lao Theung and one of Mien. Also like its predecessor, Nam Yu's 2nd SGU Battalion was a battalion in name only, never having trained together as a cohesive force. Slapped together at Nam Yu, this "battalion" was shipped to Long Tieng in May, and then ferried out to Phou Long Mat, recently vacated by Pakse's 3rd SGU Battalion. After a mid-June skirmish caused them to retreat in disarray, Tony Poe flew them back to MR 1 and fired the lot.

To shore up the sagging defences around Phou Long Mat, the Nam Yu troops were replaced by Savannakhet irregulars. Soon after establishing themselves at Phou Long Mat, however, the grumbling from the Savannakhet guerrillas grew increasingly audible. Despite the best efforts of their case officer, the contingent quickly made good on their threat to abandon their mountain posts. They eventually wilted and got their plane ride back to MR 3.

Even though the collective paramilitary performance in MR 2 through the spring of 1970 had been less than stellar, more impressive (in a relative sense) was the conduct of the regular troops secretly dispatched from the RTA. Expanding beyond the single SR 9 artillery battalion that arrived in March, Bangkok had discretely agreed to a larger augmentation package of three infantry battalions and two artillery battalions, all scheduled to serve a full year in Laos. Four of the five battalions came from the Udorn-based 13th Regimental Combat Team. Burr Smith, the three-year MR 2 case officer earlier evacuated with a bleeding ulcer, was assigned as the CIA liaison officer to these five RTA battalions, which were collectively designated Task Force Vang Pao.

Quickly, Task Force Vang Pao was parcelled out across the MR 2 front. By mid-April, two 105mm howitzers were lifted to the top of Skyline Ridge to form the unit's first fire support base (FSB), call-signed Tiger. At month's end, two more 105mm and two 155mm tubes were relocated to Zebra Ridge, becoming the task force's second firebase, FSB Zebra. During summer, its infantry battalions were split between Phou Long Mat and Sam Thong, forming FSB Eagle at the latter.

Welcome though it was, Task Force Vang Pao was nothing more than an emergency stopgap. The Thai regulars were willing to hold down the rear temporarily, but it was up to the lighter, more mobile irregular forces to advance and retake real estate. For General Vang Pao, then, the question became whether he could cobble together enough Hmong guerrillas to effectively extend his front line during the upcoming rainy season. For that, he would have to go all out to train what few new troops he could muster, while at the same time retraining all those chewed up during the reverses in the first quarter of the year.

Looking over his troops, the general dispatched one battalion's worth of fresh recruits to an SGU training centre established at Xieng Lom in MR 1. Of his existing three GMs, they were sent to Moung Cha and Thailand for retraining stints. Because Phitscamp was limited in size, new Thai training centres were opened at Nong Takoo (soon closed because of bad infrastructure) and Nam Pung Dam, 28 kilometres southwest of the Thai town of Sakhon Nakhon.

4

FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

Up until that period, Vang Pao had relied on airpower as his guardian angel. Increasingly, however, he was coming to respect another form of support: artillery. Indeed, both were deemed critical for Vang Pao's imminent rainy season drive, named Operation Thanong Kiet ("Preserve Honour").

Unlike the previous summer's extravaganza, Thanong Kiet was a muted affair, the general having exhausted both his own troops and the goodwill of other MR commanders to assemble the necessary forces for a replay of Kou Kiet. In addition, PAVN was still close to home — clinging fast to Ban Na and Moung Soui. Worse, the Vietnamese troops appeared well fed; Vang Pao had started making a habit of cutting open the stomachs of PAVN casualties to examine the contents.

As a first order of business, the general would need to evict these PAVN holdouts. Keeping his goals modest, then, Vang Pao focused Thanong Kiet solely on retaking Ban Na. The operation was set to kick off on 3 August with Major Tou Vang Yang's BG 227 airlifted to a landing zone northwest of Ban Na.

Repeatedly held up by bad weather, the battalion was finally inserted 15 days late. Immediately, the weather closed in and prevented close air support. In addition, the North Vietnamese defenders, though few in number, were tenacious in their resistance. Very quickly, Thanong Kiet fizzled into a non-event.

Failing at Ban Na, the Thanong Kiet battalion pivoted, linked up with some ADC out of Xieng Dat, and on 27 August moved north against Moung Soui. There, the irregulars briefly managed to gain a foothold on the western end of the Moung Soui runway before the communist defenders, again few in number, sent the irregulars spilling backward during the second week of September.

Although his blows at Ban Na and Moung Soui had been effectively parried, Vang Pao answered on 26 September with a fresh jab named Operation Counterpunch. Opening with a quick search for communist caches near Route 4, the battalion-size force, encountering little opposition, on 2 October headed toward Khang Kho off the southern PDJ.

As his troops closed on Khang Kho, Vang Pao restarted his stalled Moung Soui drive during the first week of October under the name of Counterpunch II. This time, a Nam Yu SGU battalion was injected into the fray, while elements of BG 227 were airlifted 12 kilometres north of the target. By 11 October, they at long last took Moung Soui.

As this was transpiring, the original Counterpunch operation south of the PDJ was remoulded into a complex, multi-pronged offensive with Ban Na as its final goal. Participating were GM 22 and 23, as well as the RTA battalions of Task Force Vang Pao.

Together, these units saw some gains. But before the Counterpunch grand plan could be taken to its conclusion, the operation began to fall apart. With the dry season just weeks away — and USAF sorties reduced on 1 November because of growing demands along the Ho Chi Minh Trail — Vang Pao had been able to push PAVN back just 30 kilometres, leaving the North Vietnamese with undisputed control over the PDJ and a patchwork of resistance southwest of the plain.

Coincident with Vang Pao's successive, benign counterpunches was a major reorganisation of Long Tieng Unit. In as the new chief of unit was Joseph "Dick" Johnson, a former U.S. Marine and veteran of the Bay of Pigs and Congo operations. Hog Daniels, half of the two-man team at Bouamlong, became his chief of operations. Daniels, an MR 2 advisor since 1966, had forged deep, emotional links with the Hmong — feelings reciprocated by the hill tribesmen — leading to charges by several of his paramilitary colleagues that he had gone native. Going native too was Burr Smith, named the CIA's liaison to the MR 2 Joint Operations Centre, a regional level coordination body that met daily at Vang Pao's house to watch over ongoing operations (as a second hat, Smith continued to act as Vang Pao's personal case officer).

Several MR 2 veterans were gone. Bag Odom, the other half of the Bouamlong duo, took extended leave in the U.S. (he would return to Long Tieng in June 1971 as deputy chief of operations). Howard Freeman, the seasoned deputy chief of unit, shifted down to Vientiane to work against Soviet targets. Bob Gallardo, who had

White strings are tied around the wrists during a Hmong *baci* ceremony at Long Tieng during 1970. The guests from left to right: Jim "Tiny" McElroy, unidentified, Burr "Mister Clean" Smith, Bobby "Watts" Shires, Vientiane Deputy Station Chief Clyde McAvoy, and Long Tieng Unit Chief Dick Johnson. (Photo courtesy Cynthia S. Finn)

walked the PDJ during Kou Kiet, completed his tour and departed the kingdom. Alabama, the Commando Raider advisor at Pha Khao, had bid farewell to attend Auburn University.

Arriving at Long Tieng through the summer was a string of fresh advisors. Tom "Ringo" Matthews, a former Marine and Provincial Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) advisor in South Vietnam, came in June 1970 and was posted to the southern part of MR 2. Joining him was another ex-PRU advisor, Richard "Bamboo" Manns. John "Lonestar" Kearns, serving at Xieng Lom over the previous year, took over the Commando Raiders. George "Kayak" Bacon, a 24-year-old former USSF medic, replaced Burr Smith as liaison officer to the RTA in Task Force Vang Pao. Another newcomer, Dave "Red Coat" Campbell, became the sole advisor at Bouamlong. Finally, George "Digger" O'Dell, a Marine reconnaissance officer, was named advisor to GM 21.

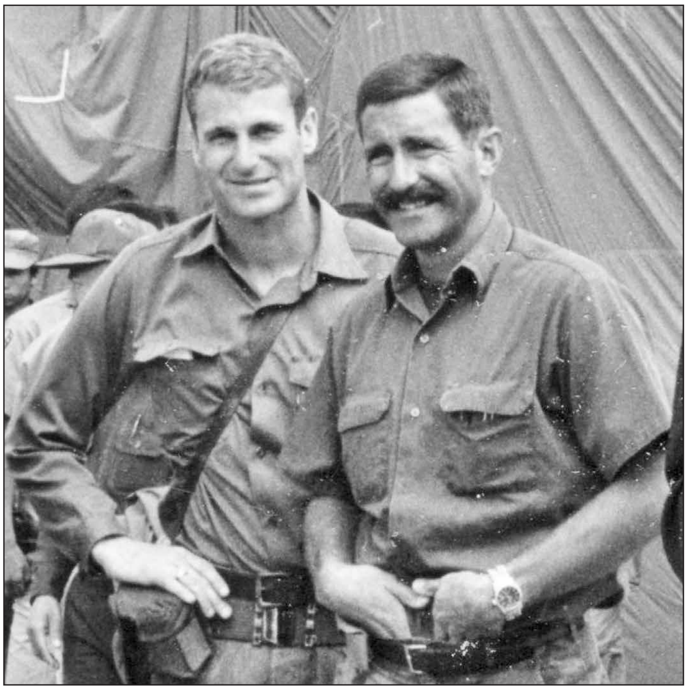
Case officer Burr Smith presents Vang Pao with a pearl-handled Colt revolver sent as a gift by Dallas computer magnate Ross Perot in 1970. Perot had come to know of Vang Pao when he passed through Vientiane in December 1969 during an abortive attempt to deliver food and Christmas gifts to American prisoners in Hanoi. (Photo courtesy Cynthia S. Finn)

Digger O'Dell had arrived just as GM 21 was set to spearhead Counterpunch III, a daring airmobile end-run aiming to pinch PAVN's westbound traffic in the Ban Ban valley before it reached the PDJ. Joining GM 21 on the endeavour would be Nhia Lu Vang's BG 224, a zone battalion formed earlier that summer from ADC who had been living in the hills just northeast of Ban Ban.

On the night of 26 November, Counterpunch III began with a team of Commando Raiders landing at San Tiau, which had been abandoned since February. By sunup, 40 commandos and a Hmong FAG had secured a landing zone and awaited the main task force. The USAF 21st Special Operations Squadron, assigned with the troop-lift, at the time was in the middle of exchanging its older CH-3Es for larger, more powerful CH-53s. As a result, a 50-50 mix of aircraft showed up at the Long Tieng flight-line to begin ferrying GM 21.

Three days later, the entire task force — GM 21 plus BG 224 — was assembled behind communist lines. From there, it was set to move north into the Ban Ban valley and, in true guerrilla fashion, raise hell. At the same time, a northern task force composed of ADC from Bouamlong was to stage south and probe Nong Pet.

For all its promise, Counterpunch III — at best — generated a yawn. The Bouamlong prong stopped well short of its objective and sat impotent in the mountains north of the Route 7-71 junction.


George "Kayak" Bacon and Jerry "Hog" Daniels in MR 2. Bacon, a former sergeant with MACVSOG in South Vietnam, served as case officer to both the RTA's task force and Hmong guerrillas in MR 2. After leaving government service, he died while fighting with anti-communist Angolan guerrillas in February 1976. (Hugh Tovar via Jim Parker)

And the southern task force, despite facing the meekest of PAVN responses, dragged its feet because, it said, fog was hindering air support. By 7 January 1971, with the operation realizing few gains, Counterpunch III was terminated.

The Ghost of Nambac

While Vang Pao's men were struggling to reverse the PAVN gains of that spring, the guerrilla forces of eastern MR 1 were still fighting the ghost of a rout two years earlier. That dramatic defeat at Nambac had in effect aborted the FG/E program in its infancy, eliminating nearly the entire militia network fanning northward into Phongsaly Province. Dissolved in the aftermath was FG/E's 1st SGU Battalion.

In late 1968, Luang Prabang Unit attempted to resuscitate its stillborn guerrilla program. Taking the lead was Colonel Thongphanh Sukhaseum, promoted from FG/E chief of operations to overall commander of Luang Prabang irregular forces. Among the first moves by Thongphanh was to reform a new irregular battalion, this time named 12th SGU Battalion, and order it to infiltrate southwest of Nambac.

Before the battalion reached its target, however, communist resistance sent the unit falling back in disarray. At that point, Captain Houmphanh Boungnasiri, returning to Luang Prabang in June 1969 after three months of training at Fort Bragg, was charged with building yet another paramilitary formation, to be named (again) 1st SGU Battalion. Rebuilt, meanwhile, was 12th SGU Battalion, under the new name of 2nd SGU Battalion. Overseeing the two formations was Doug "Cobra" Swanson, formerly stationed at the Kong My outpost in southernmost Laos.

Since FG/E had no guerrilla training centre of its own, the 1st SGU Battalion was sent down to MR 4 in late 1969 for three months of basic training at PS 18. Once done, they gave a middling account of themselves during a series of brief skirmishes. With this modicum of combat experience, the 1st SGU Battalion, along with advisor Swanson, boarded aircraft for MR 4, where it would participate later that summer in a Bolovens fiasco named Operation Honourable Dragon.

Live and Let Die

Down in MR 3, the war through 1969 had settled along a surprisingly stable frontline, with the RLG holding Moung Phalane and the communists secure at Moung Phine. That all changed with Junction City Junior. In that single operation, Savannakhet tasted the Trail — and hungered for more. In late 1969, SGUs were again edging toward the eastern panhandle, only to have their efforts undercut because of deployments to bail out Vang Pao in MR 2 through the first quarter of 1970.

As its irregular battalions returned from MR 2 during the second quarter, Savannakhet Unit began a series of multi-battalion stabs toward the Trail. Doing just enough to irritate PAVN, they regrouped at Moung Phalane by the close of June 1970.

Back at Nong Saphong, the CIA was toying with a new paramilitary formation called Mobile 1. The background to this latest creation stemmed from regional politics in the Lao military. With the relatively large recruitment pool in MR 3, it was fast becoming apparent that Savannakhet Unit would be increasingly called upon to send its troops to reinforce other military regions (primarily MR 2). However, on the occasions when Savannakhet had already done so, Long Tieng complained of being shortchanged. MR 2's SGU battalions, after all, had an authorised strength of 550 men, while the colour-coded battalions fielded by MR 3 were roughly half that size. Bad feelings had sprung up all around, Savannakhet about Long Tieng being ungracious, Long Tieng about Savannakhet delivering half of what was expected.

The resulting compromise was for Savannakhet Unit to raise three 550-man Mobiles expressly for reinforcement duties outside MR 3, while the existing 300-man colour-coded SGU battalions would be used exclusively to attack the Trail inside MR 3.

The new Mobiles were recruited mostly from Khammouane Province with both the help and interference of Prince Boun Oum, who saw an opportunity to get his fingers into a lucrative upstart program. The prince also managed to monopolise appointments to the leadership slots in the Mobiles with personal favourites.

Though intended for extra-regional duties, Mobile 1 was slated to receive its baptism by fire inside MR 3 during Operation Maeng Da. This latest venture of Savannakhet Unit was envisioned as a southern hook toward Tchepone, initially using three battalions, with a planned reinforcement as the operation progressed. While the CIA knew full well that their guerrillas would not reach Tchepone, it would serve the purpose of sending PAVN into a temporary panic.

Selected to head the operation was Colonel Touane Bouddhara, a seasoned FAR airborne officer who had transferred on 1 May 1970 to the MR 3 SGU program. Under Touane, Maeng Da would mark the first time a multiple-battalion MR 3 paramilitary operation was attempted under a single commander. On 2 July, it kicked off with Black and Blue Battalions, plus Mobile 1. They made good progress until mid-month, at which time a strong PAVN reaction frustrated plans to insert White Battalion.

During an embassy meeting in Vientiane while this was transpiring, CIA Station Chief Larry Devlin, who had not been staying current on the progress and scope of Maeng Da, found himself in the awkward position of being briefed on a major paramilitary operation by a better-informed air attaché. To cover his embarrassment, the station chief aborted the insertion plans for White Battalion, reminded Savannakhet Unit of its ban on multi-battalion operations without specific approval, and threatened to relieve everybody in sight.

After venting his steam, Devlin was finally persuaded on 18 July to extract Black Battalion, bled dry in the fighting. The other two battalions, weakened and without reinforcements, were ordered to trickle northwest. En route, an incoming round instantly transformed Mobile 1 into an undisciplined mob. Blue Battalion finally reached friendly lines on 26 July; Mobile 1 — what was left of it — was permanently dropped from the order of battle.

Undeterred, in late September Savannakhet Unit geared up for its biggest, boldest adventure to date. Although the philosophy at the time was to avoid defeat and make the irregulars feel increasingly tall, the region's CIA advisors could not resist the temptation of a late rainy season drive that could recoup a slice of Junction City Junior's glory. Their planned endeavour, known simply as the "Tchepone Operation," revolved around a pair of three-battalion task forces, one going southeast from Moung Phalane into Moung Phine, and the second heading from Moung Phalane directly east to Tchepone.

To meet the operation's six battalion requirement, Green, Orange and Black Battalions were directed to Moung Phalane. There they linked up with Red Battalion, on-site since being repatriated from MR 2 in mid-August. Also on hand was Brown Battalion, just off a tour in MR 4. Rounding out the contingent was the freshly-raised Red Bravo Battalion. (Having run out of primary colours, any new battalions used a "bravo" suffix.)

With this cast of participants, the Tchepone Operation began on 19 October. Again, the overall commander was Colonel Touane, who was to accompany the northern task force composed of Black, Red and Orange Battalions. The southern leg — Green, Brown and Red Bravo Battalions — was under the senior battalion commander, Brown's Lieutenant Colonel Boonmark.

Almost immediately, the two elements lost contact, and neither ever supported the other. This was due mainly to a lack of initiative by the southern task force. Dragging feet, Boonmark's three battalions loitered just far enough from Moung Phine to keep contact with the communists at a bare minimum.

Touane's northern force, meanwhile, made healthy progress. They were nearly on the doorstep of Tchepone by the last day of October when PAVN unleashed a harsh response. The SGUs managed to slip away during the night, with airpower taking a heavy toll on the pursuing Vietnamese. Conservative estimates put PAVN dead in the hundreds.

As the Tchepone Operation was brought to an end on 13 November, Savannakhet Unit began a major reorganisation of its paramilitary forces. First, MR 3 was given a new SGU chief of staff when Colonel Pheng was replaced by Colonel Thao Ly, a distinguished airborne commander who had served over the previous two years as the MR 3 Chief of Operations. With an agreeable personality and good spoken English (he was a Fort Benning graduate), Ly quickly proved popular with Savannakhet's CIA advisors.

Second, the Mobile program was dissolved. By that late hour, there was not much left to disband. Mobile 1 had never been reconstituted after Maeng Da. Mobile 3, unimpressive during its first and only outing, was redistributed. Only Mobile 2, because of a strong deputy commander, survived under the new name of Silver Bravo Battalion.

Meantime, as Thao Ly and Savannakhet Unit discussed reorganisation, Nong Saphong continued to churn out "Bravo" battalions. By late November, White Bravo, Blue Bravo, Green Bravo and Brown Bravo had joined the order of battle. Two others, Orange Bravo and Black Bravo, were soon to follow, giving Savannakhet Unit some 15 300-man SGU battalions by mid-December 1970.

Seeing this, the other military regions began to realise the logic of keeping the battalion commander's span of control small and more easily manageable. As a result, a general consensus was reached at year's end to make SGU battalions throughout Laos follow the Savannakhet example. Savannakhet Unit further decided to throw out its system of colour designations and instead relabel its SGU battalions as *bataillons guerriers* with three-digit numerical designations (just as in MR 2). In that way, each former colour battalion, followed by its Bravo counterpart, was numbered in the order in which it was created. Thus, the first SGU battalion to be established, Red, became BG 301, while Red Bravo was redesignated BG 302. The second SGU battalion, White, was now BG 303, White Bravo became BG 304, Blue and Blue Bravo became BGs 305 and 306, all the way to Silver Bravo, now called BG 315.

GBs and SGUs

Since 1968, the security situation in MR 4 had more or less mirrored conditions in MR 3. The easternmost third of the region — that bordering Vietnam — was firmly under PAVN's thumb. The middle third, centred on the Bolovens, was contested by RLG irregulars (with a smattering of FAR) and PAVN, with a slight edge going to the RLG. The westernmost third, running along the Mekong valley, was firmly under the control of the RLG.

Further subdividing the region, Pakse Unit in 1968 had cleaved MR 4 into three Guerrilla Zones (GZs). Each zone — numbered in the order in which it was created — was responsible for all paramilitary activity inside its boundaries, from road- and river-watch, to running intelligence and action teams, to fielding SGU and Guerrilla Battalions (GBs).

Following the Long Tieng example, MR 4 SGU Battalions were initially configured as five-company, 550-man light infantry units designed for offensive operations. GBs, by contrast, took their inspiration from the old French-era militia; each numbered only 400 men and normally operated as individual companies while providing for local village defence. Each GZ was allocated one SGU battalion and two GBs. GZ 1, covering the northern Bolovens, had its headquarters at PS 22, home of the 1st SGU Battalion. This zone was also allocated GB 11 at PS 22, and GB 10.

To advise this zone, an average of two case officers were permanently stationed at PS 22. Another pair of case officers was stationed at LS 165, the road-watch/Commando Raider base.

GZ 2, covering the southern portion of the Bolovens, was headquartered at PS 38. Hosting a pair of CIA advisors, PS 38 was planned as a regional guerrilla training centre. Of the zone's irregular battalions, the 2nd SGU Battalion was based at PS 38, GB 21 was dispersed along the southeastern corner of the Bolovens, and GB 20 was stationed on Khong Island.

The region's last zone, GZ 3, covered the area closest to the MR 3 border. Unlike the other two zones, GZ 3 had no impressive paramilitary centrepiece comparable to PS 22 or PS 38. The zone commander, Colonel Khamsing Phommavongsay, ran his operation from PS 39, a mountaintop redoubt 22 kilometres northeast of Saravane and just one peak removed from some of the heaviest PAVN traffic traveling the Trail. Although this zone's 3rd SGU Battalion kept its headquarters at PS 39, CIA advisors spent little time at the site, given its precarious location.

Of the three Guerrilla Zones, it would be GZ 2 where PAVN made its first bloody mark of 1970. This was influenced by the change of governments in Cambodia, which now deprived PAVN of the use of Sihanoukville port for trans-shipping supplies to the South Vietnamese theatre. Hanoi immediately sought to expand its hold along the western Lao corridor, in effect serving a death warrant on RLG enclaves close to the Trail.

By that time, the number of RLG-held sites near the Trail was not extensive. Of them, one of the largest was the provincial capital of Attopeu. Unlike other isolated bases — like Bouamlong in MR 2, which traced its longevity to favourable topography and a hardnosed commander — Attopeu benefited from neither. Instead, the garrison commander had done his best to maintain a peaceful status quo with the communists.

In the end, such efforts to put a benign face on Attopeu counted for little. Beginning in early April 1970, North Vietnamese pressure began to mount: two days before month's end, Group 968 troops struck hard. The town's defences crumbling, stragglers scrambled up the side of the Bolovens and reached PS 38 on 30 April. Left behind were 150 FAR bodies — one of the highest death tolls for any single RLG military encounter.

Significantly, the fall of Attopeu represented the first time PAVN had crossed the 1962 Geneva-defined boundaries to seize an RLG-held provincial capital. Although this was a precedent FAR could ill afford to let stand, General Phasouk had insufficient FAR troops to retake the lost ground. Pakse Unit, then, received the assignment of rolling back the North Vietnamese.

To do this, the 2nd SGU Battalion, earlier lent to help Vang Pao, was sent back to MR 4 the day after Attopeu fell. Then, badgering its colleagues farther up the panhandle, Pakse Unit took loan of Savannakhet's Brown Battalion. Both these battalions joined a

Neutralist airborne battalion, which (in a rare act of cooperation with the SGU program) had been pulling static defence duty at PS 38.

On 1 May a 400-man force, mixing elements of all three units, staged east from PS 38 toward PAVN-occupied PS 26. Just 400 meters from its target, the RLG task force ran into heavy resistance and was thrown back. Following this encounter, the Neutralists took off, leaving 200 irregulars to renew the effort five days later. This time, the Lao guerrillas wrested a foothold on the summit — only to be ousted later the same day. The mountain would change hands four more times on 7 and 8 May before the task force, defeated, withdrew toward its launch site.

Emboldened, PAVN advanced across the southern Bolovens, capturing two smaller outposts on 11 May. Twenty-four hours later, the same fate befell PS 38, all but closing the book on GZ 2.

With the monsoons just around the corner, Pakse Unit planned an early rainy season drive in mid-May to retake lost portions of the southern Bolovens. Alone for the effort would be 3rd SGU Battalion, recently returned with heavy losses from a tour in MR 2. Diverted from its normal roost near Saravane, the battalion was dispatched directly to PS 22, from where it was to stage south for a retake of PS 26, and then PS 38. Rebuffed at its first target, the Saravane irregulars switched directions and, supported by 105mm howitzers, on 23 May easily reoccupied PS 38. There they were allowed to rest, absorbing an occasional PAVN heavy-weapons barrage while awaiting reinforcements before making another crack at PS 26.

Just as the GZ 2 front was cooling down, GZ 3 was heating up. There the PAVN target was Saravane, the second largest town in MR 4. As in Attopeu, the RLG administrators at Saravane, mindful of their close proximity to the Trail, were never particularly eager to irritate the communists. Even so, Vietnamese pressure forced them to abandon the town with barely a fight on 9 June.

On 10 June, the day after Saravane fell, the MR 4 headquarters slapped together weak plans for retaking the town. Not surprisingly, two disparate FAR columns never linked up and the operation fell flat.

On a roll, PAVN veered toward Phou Kate, the old Pincushion site 13 kilometres southeast of Saravane. Attracted by its sheer rock sides and short distance from the Trail, the USAF had used the top of Phou Kate as site for a TACAN beacon since the spring of 1966. With thick minefields and concertina wire ringing the site since early 1968 — plus an ADC company garrisoned on its crest — the mountain was deemed impregnable.

Over the next two years, Phou Kate had, in fact, proved impervious to Vietnamese attack: apart from a tigress and her two cubs killed by mines in 1969, few had dared to challenge its defences. However, that began changing in the spring of 1970, when an ADC patrol foiled a PAVN commando raid, capturing a map that showed a line of attack straight up the rock face.

On 18 June 1970, with much of GZ 3 in Vietnamese hands, Dac Cong troops returned to Phou Kate. In a near-identical repeat of the 1968 Phou Phathi assault, the commandos worked their way up the side and captured the post, giving the lie to the site's allegedly insurmountable topographic challenges.

The setbacks for GZ 3 continued as North Vietnamese troops captured the zone headquarters, PS 39, on 22 June. Even though heliborne guerrilla forces managed to reoccupy Phou Kate in July, neither Pakse Unit nor General Phasouk had bodies to spare for a major campaign to retake Saravane or its paramilitary satellite camps. By the late summer, GZ 3 permanently relocated its headquarters to the safer climes of PS 47, 11 kilometres north of Khong Sedone.

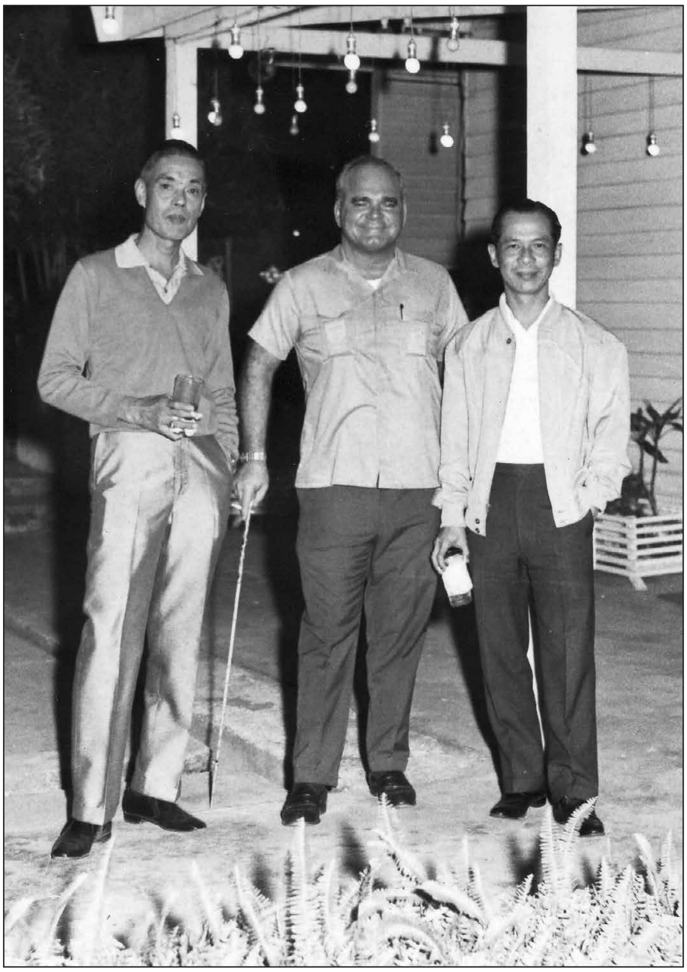
Honourable Dragon

In GZ 2, troop shortages plagued plans for an RLG rainy season offensive to retake lost real estate. Pakse Unit, as a result, had little choice other than to mimic Long Tieng in begging for extra-regional reinforcements. Coming during the monsoons — usually at a time of reduced PAVN activity — other regions showed sympathy to the request.

First to respond was Luang Prabang's FG/E, which dispatched its 1st SGU Battalion. From MR 3 came Mobile 2, the newly formed Mobile 3, and White Battalion. All three grouped at PS 22, with Mobile 3 dispatched over the edge of the plateau and ordered south to rendezvous with Luang Prabang guerrillas moving north.

In addition to the paramilitary contributions from MRs 1 and 3 was a battalion of irregulars from MR 2. This battalion had its origins in mid-April 1970, when Hog Daniels had escorted 600 Hmong recruits for training at PS 22. Four months later it emerged as BG 224.

With this diverse cast of five extra-regional battalions, Pakse Unit was set to launch Operation Honourable Dragon on 31 August. The campaign's goal was the retaking of PS 26, held by diehard PAVN troops dug into its narrow summit. Larry Devlin, in his final few days as station chief, ventured down to the Bolovens to witness the preparations; he had just returned from a visit to the White House,



Three of the most influential figures supporting the paramilitary forces in Laos: RTA General Paitoon "Petch" Inkatanawat, 4802nd JLD chief Pat Landry, and Headquarters 333 commander Dhep, circa 1970. Though he never held an official position in Headquarters 333, Paitoon had been hovering around Lao affairs since the late fifties and wielded immense weight as the trusted aide to Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittakachorn. (Author's collection) where he was reminded that President Richard Nixon wanted ramped-up paramilitary pressure in Laos.

Honourable Dragon began well enough. On the first day, Luang Prabang troops moving up the valley arrived near the southeastern base of PS 26, uncovering three AK-47 rifles and one Vietnamese corpse. Twenty-four hours later, however, PAVN hit the MR 1 unit with a volley of mortar and recoilless rifle rounds. At that, the Luang Prabang contingent climbed back onto the Bolovens, retreated to PS 38, and — reminding their case officer that their promised three-month tour in MR 4 had already expired — demanded a return to MR 1.

Little better was the performance of MR 4's own 3rd SGU Battalion, which had been sent down from GZ 3. To the consternation of case officer Chuck "Thao Heng" Gutensohn, his battalion refused to advance because they claimed to have seen ghosts. It turns out that airstrikes had filled the air with chalky dust, coating some of the Vietnamese defenders. No amount of explaining could get the SGUs back on the offensive.

Not to be outdone, the main Savannakhet column was balking and retreating well short of its target. Eventually Colonel Touane came down and personally took charge. When the White Battalion commander began to backpedal, Touane fired him on the spot and led the guerrillas onto the northern slopes of PS 26.

At that point, Vang Pao also came down to MR 4 to inspire the Hmong battalion. His words had their desired effect: BG 224 charged up PS 26's southern slope and, linking up with the Savannakhet contingent on 25 September, triumphantly swept the summit of what turned out to be a handful of PAVN holdouts. Although ending on this positive note, Honourable Dragon was so rife with false starts and poor leadership that it was an operation gladly forgotten by most of the case officers involved.

Apparently unimpressed by the sluggish advances around PS 26, the U.S. Embassy was not bullish about RLG prospects for MR 4. Such pessimism was not unfounded, as PAVN ramped-up pressure in GZ 2 by mid-November, specifically against PS 38 and PS 26. Occupying these sites were a pair of SGU battalions — Blue and the new White Bravo Battalions — both on loan from Savannakhet. Each held fast until a communist surge on the night of 21 November sent them scattering west.

As November gave way to December, the defenders at PS 22 in GZ 1 kept their proverbial heads above water, barely. The garrison's backbone, 1st SGU Battalion, was in bad shape, never having fully recovered from long-standing pressure in the field and a prolonged spell of poor leadership. Worse, reinforcements were nowhere to be had. In desperation, Pakse Unit approached Phasouk for FAR help.

Recognising that the hold over GZ 1 was in the balance, the general dispatched two infantry battalions. For Colonel Soutchay, assigned at the opening of December to personally take charge of PS 22's defences, the two FAR battalions quickly proved useless. Just days after their arrival, both battalions abandoned their positions without orders. Worse, more than half of 1st SGU Battalion joined the exodus.

Fortunately for Soutchay, the MR 3 FAR headquarters came through with an 11th-hour offer of assistance, dispatching to PS 22 one of its airborne battalions. With the paratroopers not giving ground and two case officers radioing words of encouragement to Soutchay from a Pilatus Porter in near-perpetual orbit, PS 22 held through the second week of December against repeated nightly PAVN assaults. The North Vietnamese onslaught, battered by heavy airstrikes through the second half of the month, ultimately lost its steam; PS 22, as a result, would live to see 1971.

5

EXPANDING THE WAR

In the fall of 1970, the new anti-communist Cambodian government in Phnom Penh — stung by a string of military setbacks over the summer — willingly bought into a CIA-managed, Department of Defence-funded paramilitary project in Laos codenamed Copper. With strong support all the way up to Nixon and Kissinger, the purpose of the project was to use Cambodian troops in southern Laos. In that way, they could interdict communist supply trails before the war materials had a chance to enter the Cambodian battlefield.

For its part, the Cambodian military in September 1970 assigned Lieutenant Colonel Lim Sisaath — a native of Stung Teng Province, just across the border from Khong Island — to begin raising recruits in Phnom Penh. Two raw battalions were soon formed and shuttled by Air America C-123 transports to Pakse. From there they were taken by boat up the Mekong to PS 18, which from that point was devoted exclusively to Cambodian troops. (A new camp, PS 46, was built at Wat Phu, 31 kilometres south of Pakse, to handle the MR 4 SGU training previously conducted at PS 18).

Joining the two battalions at PS 18 were CIA advisors Steve Spence, Tom Poole and Joe Glasgow. Together they oversaw the next three months of basic training, during which time they were ably assisted by six ethnic Cambodian instructors with experience in the South Vietnamese army.

As Copper was fully funded and supplied by the Pentagon, the Cambodian battalions were better equipped relative to the SGUs, which relied on more cost-effective CIA supply channels. All Cambodian troops, for example, were given M16 rifles; the SGU, by contrast, had yet to be fully outfitted with this weapon. Each Cambodian platoon was given 60mm mortars, while each company had pairs of 81mm mortars and 3.5-inch rocket launchers.

By year's end, both Cambodian battalions graduated from PS 18. As-yet untested in battle — and with MR 4 hard pressed for reinforcements — it was decided to employ the Cambodians on a live-fire exercise on the southeastern Bolovens. On New Year's Day 1971, one battalion was lifted to the abandoned PS 43 outpost. Eight days later, the battalion was shuttled another 20 kilometres east, retaking the GZ 2 headquarters at PS 38 without resistance.

Two weeks after PS 38 was reoccupied, the second Cambodian battalion arrived at the base. The first battalion, meanwhile, had suffered two dead in the course of brief skirmishes and was already demanding a return to PS 18.

Soon after, PAVN struck PS 38 at night and inflicted 80 casualties on the second battalion. By the following day, all of the Cambodian troops were walking overland to Paksong, from where they were lifted back to PS 18.

As if its poor combat performance was not enough, the first battalion was lifted back to Phnom Penh for a brief rest — and promptly deserted. A third battalion, which had just begun basic training at PS 18, mutinied and was repatriated in disgrace. Worse, Sisaath's deputy was caught smuggling heroin from Laos to Cambodia. Sisaath took the fall for all this and was promptly sacked.

Ambassador Mac Godley reviews Project Copper's Cambodian soldiers at PS 18, fall 1970. Walking with him are (left to right) Pakse Unit Chief Len Gmirkin, MR 4 training officer Jim Dunn, and the ranking Cambodian officer for Project Copper, Lieutenant Colonel Lim Sisaath. (Photo courtesy James Dunn)

Looking to restart Copper from scratch, Cambodian leader Lon Nol turned to his brother, Lieutenant Colonel Lon Non. Fast rising up the ranks due to nepotism, Lon Non in August 1970 had been named commander of the as-yet unformed 15th Infantry Brigade in Phnom Penh. Set at five battalions, the brigade began sending raw recruits to South Vietnam for training under U.S. auspices.

The brigade was nearly at full strength when Lon Non inherited Copper in February 1971. To manage Copper, Lon Non dispatched three Cambodian officers to PS 18. With these three at PS 18, the 15th Brigade was readied for operations in Laos. Because most of the brigade already had been trained in South Vietnam, instruction at PS 18 was not provided for all troops in this second Copper wave. Instead, they were flown directly to Pakse, then choppered to the southeastern edge of the Bolovens.

Compared to the first Copper cycle, Lon Non's contingent fared little better. While some of these new Cambodian troops took PS 43 and 38 with little resistance, others simply disappeared from the Bolovens and took flights home. Too, Lon Non appeared intent on using the Lao flights to smuggle drugs. This was more than enough to fully sour Langley to the project. In a terse 4 June 1971 memo from CIA Director Richard Helms to Kissinger, he stated that Copper was being terminated due to poor results.

Project Unity

Cambodia, indirectly, would feature in another, far bigger Lao paramilitary program. This one had its origins in March 1970, when Bangkok publicly declared that it would be sending Thai volunteers to help defend Cambodian cities from intense communist pressure. While they would be Thai nationals, the vast majority were to be ethnic Cambodians living in the Thai provinces along the Cambodian border. To this offer, Cambodia had initially been amenable. To foot the bill, the U.S. Department of Defence stepped in and agreed to underwrite the contingent.

Before a single Thai-Cambodian volunteer was deployed, the dire situation in Cambodia somewhat stabilised by July and Phnom Penh waffled on its support. Not by coincidence, during September 1970 the idea of shifting the Thai-Cambodian volunteers to southern Laos was being scrutinised in closed-door White House sessions.

The plan discussed in Washington far exceeded the original Cambodian scheme. It envisioned a dozen infantry battalions that would each consist of 22 cadre and 33 medical personnel seconded from the RTA, plus 495 Thai volunteers with prior military service in either Korea or Vietnam. Only the first two battalions would have a high percentage of Thai-Cambodians. As with Project Copper, the Pentagon was to foot the entire bill — including the provision of uniforms and equipment from U.S. military stocks — while the CIA would administer the program in the field.

Though named Unity — ostensibly in reference to the spirit of cooperation between the United States, Thailand and Laos — the Thai volunteer program was finalised during three weeks of negotiations in Bangkok attended exclusively by U.S. and Thai officials. From the U.S. side came CIA representatives from Udorn, Vientiane, Bangkok and Washington, as well as Lieutenant General Richard Stilwell, previously commander of U.S. forces in Thailand and now the U.S. Army's deputy chief of staff. Heading the Thai side were top RTA Generals Kriangsak Chomanand and Prapas Charusathien.

From the outset of negotiations, Stilwell opposed the Unity program ostensibly on account of cost. This was not actually the case: Unity battalions were budgeted at only a fraction of a comparable RTA deployment. This presented a potential problem, as the RTA regulars of Task Force Vang Pao (committed to a full-year tour in Laos) would likely overlap with Unity, and the former were on considerably higher pay scales. In the end, the RTA top brass agreed to bring Task Force Vang Pao down to the Unity salary levels for the remainder of their tour.

After settling details on equipment and wages, Unity assumed control over the volunteers originally destined for Cambodia. That force, totalling two battalions, was quartered near Prachinburi, the provincial capital midway between Bangkok and the Cambodian border. Acting as instructor cadre were two teams, one from the RTSF and one from the USSF 46th Special Forces Company. Assigned as case officers to the project were four Laos veterans: Tony Poe, who had grown too controversial for his earlier posting at Nam Yu; Dunc Jewell, with considerable experience on the Bolovens; Chuck Campbell, who had walked the PDJ during Kou Kiet; and Doug Swanson, coming off an assignment with Luang Prabang SGUs.

The RTA chief of staff, General Surakit Mayalarb (third from left), played a crucial role in approving the Unity program, especially the pay incentives for the Thai military cadre and volunteers. Here he receives a briefing from Vang Pao (second from right) at Long Tieng in 1967; looking on are Dhep (left), Pranet (fourth from right) and the RTA's counterinsurgency architect, Lieutenant General Saiyud Kerdphol (third from right). (Author's collection)

By early December 1970, both battalions finished training. At that point, a handful of RLG officials, including Souvanna Phouma, were brought into the picture. Hardly in a position to refuse military assistance, the RLG nevertheless set two conditions for the use of Unity troops: first, they would be deployed far from Vientiane; second, they would be deployed in an area of serious threat.

Though past experience dictated that young paramilitary formations be weaned slowly to combat, CIA officials were confident that the initial two Unity battalions (whose cadre included a dozen RTSF members) could handle a challenge. Accordingly, the two were slated for deployment to the northern Bolovens in an area of known PAVN activity. On 15 December, both Thai battalions entered Laos with the French designations *Bataillon Commando* (BC) 601 and BC 602 in order to camouflage them within the FAR order of battle. All subsequent Unity battalions were numbered sequentially in the 600 series.

Immediately upon arrival in MR 4, the two battalions were lifted to Houei Sai, 19 kilometres northeast of Paksong. The Thai settled just south of that abandoned village, where they set about erecting a formidable defensive perimeter. Double trench lines were cut in all directions, outside of which was sown a minefield, and on top of that a layer of concertina.

Despite such precautions, the Thai were hit by heavy-weapons fire nine days after arrival, suffering four wounded. Those responsible were from the PAVN 9th Regiment, the veteran formation comprising the core of Group 968. Moving down from the Saravane vicinity, the seasoned troops from the 9th, assuming the garrison to be a FAR battalion, upped the pressure through the New Year.

For their part, the Thai troops sat tight even as North Vietnamese patrols used water buffaloes to detonate outlying minefields in apparent preparation for a ground assault. That attack came at 0200 hours on 8 January 1971, when PAVN infantry advanced from the southeast and northwest. At that point the Thai unleashed a withering array of mortar rounds and small-arms fire. Inspecting the outer wire at daybreak, the Unity troops found 131 Vietnamese bodies. In return, they had lost only one of their own.

President Nixon, for one, was elated by the Thai victory. "I want you to know how impressed I have been with the performance of the Thai personnel," he gushed in a 14 January telegram to Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn. "I wish in particular to commend the irregular forces at Ban Houay Sai [sic] who recently inflicted very heavy casualties."

Project Unity, it seemed, was off to an excellent start.

All Fall Down

By the beginning of March 1971, remembers Pakse Chief of Unit Carl Jenkins, "[MR 4 case officers] were talking about Cambodians losing the Bolovens and the Thai winning it back." From that point forward, however, the RLG's grip over the plateau would only deteriorate. First to suffer was PS 22, which had so valiantly held fast through December. In the face of a PAVN blitz on 8 March, not only did PS 22 fall, but also three nearby sites.

Worse was to come in May 1971, when North Vietnamese troops infiltrated heavy weapons around the Bolovens town of Paksong at the Route 23-232 intersection. Looking to capture this junction, PAVN unleashed a concerted artillery barrage. By dusk, all RLG forces were in full retreat. So fast was the rout that PAVN infantry had yet to enter the fray.

With the central Bolovens in North Vietnamese hands, that left Houei Kong isolated on the eastern plateau. On 19 May, with reports of PAVN troops closing, the town's defenders — headed by the flighty 1st SGU Battalion — began exfiltrating west. By noon, Houei Kong fell without a fight. Having lost all outposts on the Bolovens, FAR and SGU stragglers fell back along Route 23 to Ban Gnik on the western edge of the plateau.

In Pakse, the gloom at the MR 4 headquarters was infectious. Phasouk, depressed, withdrew into his house for two days. Vietnamese and Chinese merchants — always an accurate barometer of impending doom — packed their wares and left the city. The RLAF T-28 contingent, fearful for its inventory, began spending nights across the Mekong at Ubon RTAFB.

Desperate, Phasouk gave in to CIA pressure and named Colonel Soutchay the new field commander tasked with retaking Paksong. Fortunately for Soutchay, the monsoon rains were starting; though this complicated tactical air support, it also hindered PAVN resupply. The colonel also benefited from reinforcement by one Neutralist and two FAR battalions. On 9 June Soutchay, at the helm of this mixed task force, launched his eastern drive. His troops barely responded, however, edging just east of the Ban Gnik village limits on the first day.

Before Soutchay could consolidate these meagre gains, PAVN lashed out the following night, rolling the bulk of RLG troops back through Ban Gnik. Worse, a trio of PAVN PT-76 tanks entered combat for the first time in MR 4, taking direct aim at Soutchay's forward command post. With the battle leaning heavily in favour of the Vietnamese, PAVN suddenly stumbled. Perhaps overconfident, communist troops surged forward in exposed waves as the sun began to burn off the cloud cover. Airpower then took over, devastating the PAVN ranks. FAR troops, meanwhile, were able to kill one tank with heavy-weapons fire.

Far from being counted out, PAVN troops managed to circle behind Soutchay and block Route 23. As Soutchay radioed for help, heeding his call was the Thai Unity contingent, which had recently returned to Pakse following a short assignment in MR 2. Major Chalum, the ranking Unity commander on the scene, immediately loaded a truck convoy with a company from BC 601 and rushed east. Dismounting several kilometres short of the front line, the Thai continued on foot. Running into a PAVN ambush, they were wiped out to the man.

Despite the loss of the Thai reinforcements, things were looking up for Soutchay as the weather improved by early afternoon and jets arrived overhead. One of the two surviving PT-76 tanks was destroyed with bombs, the other damaged. All told, as many as 700 PAVN troops were believed killed by air — so many dead that vultures were a hazard to flying for several weeks.

For the time being, the front line stabilised just west of Ban Gnik. Now the battle was between Phasouk and Vang Pao over who could land extra-regional reinforcements during the months ahead.

Savannakhet's Legion

For Savannakhet Unit, January 1971 was dedicated to the continued reorganisation of its paramilitary forces. At the time, the training centre at Nong Saphong (which, in keeping with the times, had changed its name from 'SGU Camp' to 'BG Camp') was in the process of training three new BGs beyond the 15 already in the MR 3 order of battle. In addition, Savannakhet Unit on 3 January selected four officers for a proposed heavy-weapons unit, the 324 Heavy Weapons Battalion; the four were then dispatched for three months of training in Thailand.

With this critical mass of battalions on hand, MR 3 was set to make the jump to irregular regiments — *groupements mobiles* — each composed of four BGs and a 21-man headquarters staff. Up to that time, no MR 3 irregular commander had more experience than Colonel Touane Bouddhara. Accordingly, Savannakhet Unit selected him to command their first regiment, GM 30. Helping him as CIA advisor to the regiment would be Donald "Thanh Chert" Courtney. An ex-smoke jumper, Thanh Chert had served in the Congo during the heyday of the Simba rebellion.

To fill GM 30, Touane chose Red (BG 301), Red Bravo (BG 302), Black (BG 313), and Blue Bravo (BG 306). The first three had been with him on the Tchepone Operation the previous fall. With these four, GM 30 — call-signed the Black Dragons — was ready for business.

Chosen to head the next regiment, GM 31, was the lacklustre Lieutenant Colonel Boun Lu Nammathou. Assisting Boun Lu as case officer was John Hurd — call-signed Montana — a graduate of the University of Montana where he had been a classmate of Hog Daniels. For his four, Boun Lu picked Green Bravo (BG 308), an all-Lao Theung battalion with little combat experience; Brown Bravo (BG 310); Silver Bravo (BG 315), which traced its lineage to the old Mobile 2; and BG 318, freshly graduated from Nong Saphong. As a regiment, GM 31 took the call-sign Father Lion.

GM 32 was headed by another officer transferred from FAR, the Fort Benning graduate and long-time paratrooper Lieutenant Colonel Bounheuang Sihanatharat. Assigned as his case officer was James "Sword" Lewis, a former Green Beret with considerable Vietnam experience. For GM 32, Bounheuang chose a fairly novice crowd: White (BG 303), one of the original SGU battalions; Black Bravo (BG 314), a late 1970 creation that had yet to see action; and BGs 316 and 317, both new units. The regiment's call-sign was Tiger.

The next regiment, GM 33, was under the veteran MR 3 paramilitary commander Colonel Vanthong. Because of his seniority, Vanthong was able to land several units with experience: Blue (BG 305), one of the region's originals; Green (BG 307), another early unit; Brown (BG 309), a third veteran battalion; and Orange Bravo (BG 312), yet to see combat. The regimental call-sign was King Cobra and its case officer was Larry "Boston" Dacey.

Selection over, 16 of the region's 18 battalions were committed to regiments. That left two others: White Bravo (BG 304), yet to see any significant action; and Orange (BG 311), unimpressive in its encounters to date. Both were grouped into GM 34, a half-strength reserve unit charged with local security around Nong Saphong. GM 34's regimental call-sign was Young Man.

Silver Buckle and Desert Rat

With this complement of regiments, Savannakhet Unit hatched as its first GM operation a nightmare named Silver Buckle. The mission, to kick off on 5 January 1971, was set along the Trail. Instead of continuing the previous year's fixation with Tchepone, however, Silver Buckle aimed to interdict the important artery of Route 92, 50 kilometres southeast.

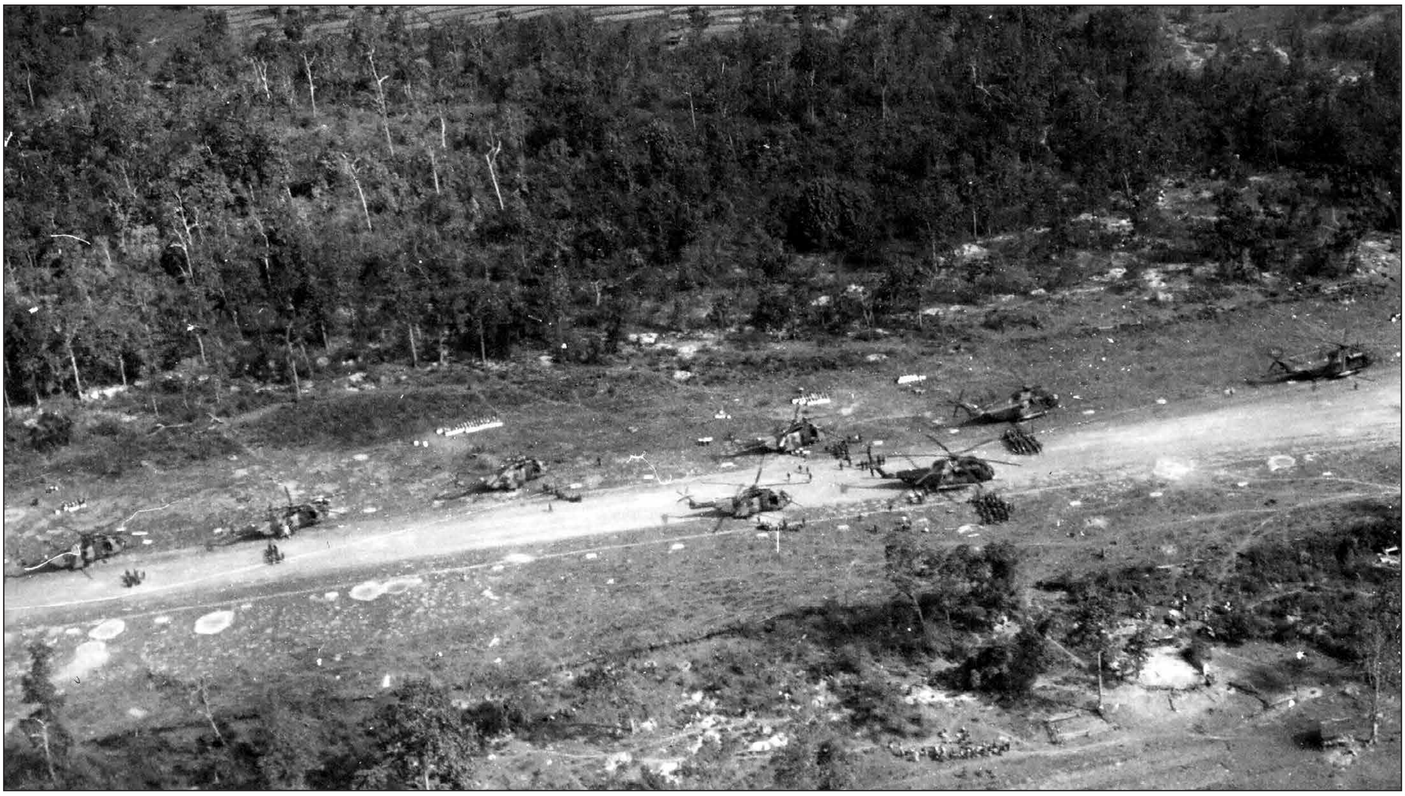
As scheduled, GM 30 was infiltrated by helicopter without incident. From there, Touane and his deputy, Major Vatsana, split the GM in two and progressed in tandem. En route, Vatsana's column planted mines and tried to crater the road. Finding nothing worth burning, they then turned north to attempt a linkup with Touane.

For his part, Touane was making slow progress toward the village of Moung Nong. By 27 January, he got close enough to send two companies toward the village to plant mines and direct some airstrikes.

Shortly thereafter, GM 30 got plenty of unexpected company. To its north, the South Vietnamese military on 8 February unleashed thousands of its infantrymen, rangers, paratroopers, marines and tankers in a massive stab toward Tchepone codenamed Operation Lam Son 719. In that light, Silver Buckle's true purpose became clear: to divert PAVN attention and prevent North Vietnamese reinforcements from heading north along Route 92 to hit the Lam Son vicinity.

Unfortunately for the troops of Lam Son 719 and Silver Buckle, Hanoi gave more than they got. As the bulk of its ample assets squared off against South Vietnam's forces, PAVN dispatched two infantry regiments, artillery and armour to protect Moung Nong from Silver Buckle. In the resultant mismatch, BG 306 was immediately overwhelmed. Soon after, the rest of Touane's northern column crumbled. Mobilising as well against Vatsana, the North Vietnamese scattered the remainder of GM 30. By 22 February, the regiment reached the RLG frontline with heavy casualties.

As Silver Buckle was ending, GM 31 was suiting up for its first outing in MR 2. GM 32, meanwhile, had half its men still training at Nong Saphong. That left Vanthong's GM 33 as the sole candidate for Savannakhet Unit's next Trail adventure, Operation Desert Rat.



In the first GM-sized operation conducted by MR 3, GM 30 prepares to board five CH-3s and three CH-53s for insertion near Route 92 during Operation Silver Buckle, 5 January 1971. (Author's collection)

Colonel Toune Bouddhara, commander of GM 30, studies a map at the outset of Operation Silver Buckle, 5 January 1971. A former FAR paratrooper, Touane has Lao airborne wings over his right chest, U.S. wings over his left. (Author's collection)

Like Silver Buckle, Desert Rat, set to start 16 February, was intended as a diversion for the ongoing Lam Son 719 campaign. This time, the irregulars were to air-assault into a landing zone 15 kilometres southwest of Moung Phine, then push east across Route 23. There they were to seize the wedge of high ground east of Route 23 and west of Route 238 that overlooked Moung Phine from the south. In addition to interdicting communist traffic on both roads, the GM was to await the order to seize Moung Phine itself.

With Ban Houei Mun designated as launch site for Desert Rat, GM 33 arrived just in time to greet GM 30 stragglers bloodied during Silver Buckle. Despite this intimidating sight, Vanthong led GM 33 east and occupied the forested high ground south of Moung Phine. There it remained until mid-March, effectively halting traffic along Routes 23 and 238.

Desert Rat having met with success thus far, Savannakhet Unit felt sufficiently confident to begin the operation's final phase — the attack on Moung Phone — on the morning of 20 March. Just 30 minutes before the regiment was to start out of the hills, however, PAVN unleashed a heavy-weapons barrage followed by a two-battalion ground assault. Although Vanthong was able to stop the ground attack cold, several of his outlying units fell out of radio communication. Unable to re-establish contact, the colonel waited until nightfall, then tried to infiltrate small teams into the Moung Phine valley.

As Vanthong probed Moung Phine, the South Vietnamese on 25 March concluded Lam Son 719. PAVN, as a result, was able to shift its full attention toward the Desert Rat diversion. Reading North Vietnamese intent, Savannakhet Unit prudently called off further attacks on Moung Phine and ordered GM 33 to march to the safety of the RLG frontline.

Grandfather

At the same time the GMs were probing the Trail, a PAVN column retaliated by pushing west through Moung Phalane and in early March 1971 began pelting Dong Hene with heavy-weapons fire. Desperate, Savannakhet Unit scrambled to turn back the Vietnamese.

The only unit available was Touane's GM 30, still licking its wounds at Nong Saphong in the wake of Silver Buckle.

With no alternatives, Savannakhet Unit cut orders for half of that regiment to defend Nong Saphong, while the other half would relieve a lone guerrilla battalion at Dong Hene, then push east along Route 9 as far as possible. On 16 March, GM 30's first battalion was dispatched, followed by a second four days later. To the surprise of all, they reached Moung Phalane after a one-day forced march. PAVN had already abandoned the town, leaving behind some uncharacteristic desecrations: wooden Buddhas burned for firewood, bronze religious artifacts hung upside-down in trees, holy books used for toilet paper.

Shortly thereafter, elements of GM 33 floated into Moung Phalane following Desert Rat. On 3 April, GM 33 left Moung Phalane for a refit a Nong Saphong, leaving behind the two GM 30 battalions.

By month's end, PAVN had once more smashed its ways back into Moung Phalane. Squeezed of excellence for just over a year, an exhausted Colonel Touane promptly relinquished command of GM 30 and re-joined FAR for a safer assignment closer to the Mekong. In his place, Major Vatsana was promoted to regimental commander. PAVN, meanwhile, slowly rolled west along Route 9. CIA sources revealed that the Vietnamese — looking to enhance Pathet Lao diplomatic leverage amid rumors of impending peace negotiations — intended to capture Dong Hene and then drive on Kengkok and rocket Seno.

To counter this, Savannakhet Unit again scoured Nong Saphong. On hand was Vanthong's GM 33 (by then having rested a month after Desert Rat), plus GM 30's BG 313 (which had been protecting the training camp) and some Commando Raiders. The MR 3 FAR headquarters, meanwhile, scrounged up elements of eight battalions, two towed 105mm howitzers, two vintage M24 tanks and a pair of new M706 armoured cars. With this mixed FAR-SGU force, plans were finalised for Operation Phoutah ("Grandfather"): the rainy season defence of Dong Hene, to be followed by a push toward Moung Phalane.

To open the paramilitary side of Phoutah, Vanthong arrived at Dong Hene on 13 May and established a command post inside the old FAR Officer Candidate School. His GM 33 irregulars were divided: half to go east from Dong Hene, the other half set to push east from Kengkok. FAR's armour and artillery contribution arrived in the Dong Hene vicinity shortly thereafter and was set to protect the rear.

As the Phoutah columns left their starting blocks, PAVN immediately subjected them to heavy-weapons harassment. Ambushed near Dong Hene, Vanthong took a bullet to the stomach and was carried west, along with 50 other wounded guerrillas, for the next 13 hours. (After recovery, Vanthong resigned as GM 33 commander.)

Back at Dong Hene, the North Vietnamese walked unopposed into the town and set it afire. They then withdrew toward Moung Phalane, dropping the bridge on the eastern outskirts of Dong Hene to frustrate any RLG pursuit. On the following day, GM 33, sans commander, returned to the razed Dong Hene. There the RLG front line stood for the next two months, PAVN being content to hold Moung Phalane through the height of the monsoons.

For its part, Savannakhet Unit was not content with a frontline less than 50 kilometres away, but it was not until mid-July — with GM 30 re-emerging from Nong Saphong — that it had sufficient troops to confront the North Vietnamese. On 14 July, Phoutah restarted with GM 33 moving east from Dong Hene. Plans now called for them to take Moung Phalane, then hand over control to the fresh GM 30.

Through the second half of July, GM 33 made three failed attempts to punch its way into Moung Phalane. By the end of the first week of August, the exhausted regiment withdrew to Nong Saphong, replaced on the front by three battalions of GM 30. Plans to attack Moung Phalane were put on hold for a week, then reattempted with AC-130 gunships adding firepower from above. Again, the Lao got nowhere, in large part because desertions and malaria had reduced the battalions to just about half their authorised strength.

Finally, on 25 September, BG 313 arrived on the front, bringing GM 30 up to its full complement and improving morale. The rainy season nearing an end, GM 30 made one last stab at Moung Phalane. Again, PAVN would not budge. On that sour note, Phoutah was quietly brought to a close.

Hitting Home

Since 1954, the communists had abided by an unwritten rule to spare Luang Prabang — and the resident throne — from serious ground attack. In early February 1971, this dictum was dashed as North Vietnamese forces overwhelmed a string of RLG positions northeast of the royal capital. Reasons for this varied: perhaps retaliation for the unfolding Lam Son operation on the Trail, or maybe retribution for the ongoing military use of Luang Prabang's airfield.

Whatever the truth, the attacks concerned the king, in turn hitting a raw nerve in Vientiane. An initial infusion of FAR battalions arrived and stabilised the frontline for a month. On 22 March, however, PAVN troops surged forward. By nightfall, FAR units were streaming into Luang Prabang from outlying posts.

As dawn broke on 23 March, the PAVN 335th Independent Regiment was eight kilometres northeast of the town and closing in. Facing them along a thin defensive line was a 105mm artillery battery and several weakened FAR battalions. In an attempt to expand this buffer, FG/E's 1st SGU Battalion — renamed earlier that year as BG 121 — was ordered forward. To this, the North Vietnamese responded forcefully and stopped the battalion cold.

Bleak as the situation was, the king refused to leave his throne; to safeguard the royal bloodline, however, the crown prince was evacuated to Vientiane. As word of the siege reverberated across the kingdom, every region rose to the occasion and contributed reinforcements. In the lead was Savannakhet Unit, which dispatched two new GM 32 battalions, BGs 316 and 317. The regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bounheuang, flew that afternoon to Luang Prabang, then immediately led his two battalions up Route 4 to reinforce BG 121's toehold.

Other regions displayed similar largesse by contributing FAR and Neutralist battalions. From Luang Prabang Unit, FG/E's two other paramilitary battalions — BGs 122 and 123 — were recalled from the field and, together with BG 121, gathered into a new *groupement mobile*, GM 11.

Even Long Tieng Unit offered token support when BG 227 was shifted to the royal capital. While heavy in symbolism, the deployment spoke volumes about Vang Pao's diplomatic tact — especially given that General Sayavong, the MR 1 commander, had consistently refused to reinforce MR 2 with any of his FAR battalions during hard times.

Coordinating this mixed lot of troops, an ad hoc FAR/Neutralist/SGU staff based at the Luang Prabang runway formulated plans for twin columns to stage from the town, one heading into the high ground to the east, the other going northeast up Route 4. But before either could make progress, PAVN assaulted the line, forcing the Savannakhet irregulars and BG 121 to fall back.

Quickly, the joint staff produced a revised plan called Operation Xieng Dong. This time, three prongs were envisioned. The first, heading up Route 4, would be spearheaded by GM 11. The second, to be heliborne east of the town, comprised GM 32. A third prong consisting of FAR troops would cross the Mekong and seize the northern bank of the Nam Ou.

On 7 April, Xieng Dong kicked off with an Air America infiltration of the two GM 32 battalions into the mountains 17 kilometres east of the Luang Prabang. GM 32's BG 303, fresh out of a Nong Saphong refit, joined two days later. Arriving, too, was a heavy weapons company, its cadre having just completed training in Thailand as the core for Savannakhet Unit's embryonic 324th Heavy Weapons Battalion.

Descending out of the high ground, Lieutenant Colonel Bounheuang directed his GM 32 troops to sweep west toward Luang Prabang. On 20 April, BG 314 — the regiment's final battalion — joined them. Complete, the GM veered north in pursuit of withdrawing Vietnamese.

Along Route 4, GM 11, on its maiden assignment as a regiment, moved cautiously northeast. With FAR artillery in support, BG 121 spearheaded the drive until reaching the king's farm.

While PAVN was cooperatively withdrawing north, the Xieng Dong planners at Luang Prabang remained wary of the still-formidable 335th Regiment. Finally, on 15 May, half of GM 32 was lifted 13 kilometres northeast of the king's farm. As they swept west, Xieng Dong's third prong — two FAR battalions — belatedly headed east in late May, crossing the Mekong north of the Nam Ou. With FAR to the north, the Mekong to the west, and GM 32 to the east, the 335th Regiment was effectively boxed in. On 5 June, it lunged against the Savannakhet troops, made some progress, then withered. Broken after more than three months of heavy combat, the regiment was ordered back to North Vietnam. The threat to Luang Prabang gone, GM 32 — bedecked with over 100 decorations presented by the king — triumphantly returned south on 27 June.

Another Bad Spring

In January 1971, Vang Pao's dry season defensive buffer protecting Long Tieng was an anaemic affair compared with the extended front of a year earlier. Along a thin forward line were his manoeuvre forces: anchoring the northwestern corner just below Moung Soui was GM 23; centred on the line in the high ground near Tha Tham Bleung was GM 22; and to the southeast near Padong was an exhausted GM 21, regrouped after Counterpunch III.

Stiffening the Hmong were the RTA of Task Force Vang Pao. Used exclusively for static defence, the Thai troops held the same positions since the close of the 1970 rainy season: infantry pockets at Ban Na, Phou Long Mat and Sam Thong, plus artillery firebases at Ban Na (call-signed Puncher), Sam Thong, Skyline Ridge and the Zebra Ridge.

Looking to augment this roster with extra-regional reinforcements, Vang Pao had been greeted with none of the generosity of the previous year. Savannakhet Unit, in the midst of its reorganisation, had no troops to spare. Pakse Unit, with its own problems on the home front, was equally resistant. Vientiane, not particularly pressured, was nonetheless uninterested in helping MR 2. Nam Yu, alone, continued to rotate SGU battalions through Long Tieng.

Against these MR 2 defenders, PAVN opened its dry season offensive — named Campaign 74B — on the night of 2 February 1971. Slightly smaller than the previous year's Campaign 139, Hanoi's latest push saw the return of the 165th Regiment/312th Division, 866th Independent Regiment and 316th Division. Within the first hours of the campaign, five PT-76 tanks and artillery pummelled the Neutralist battalion at Moung Soui. By 0600 hours the following morning, the Neutralists were on the run, leaving behind four 75mm pack howitzers.

Next, PAVN moved against FSB Puncher at Ban Na. Ringing the base with antiaircraft guns to hinder resupply choppers, PAVN moved field guns to the western PDJ and began pounding the Thai troops. The RTA positions at Phou Long Mat and Zebra Ridge, too, came under heavy-weapons attack.

As the North Vietnamese artillery barrage took a steady toll, an unseasonal spate of bad weather closed over the PDJ. Taking advantage, PAVN dispatched infantry and Dac Cong against the centre of Vang Pao's defensive line. On 7 February, this force hit GM 22 in the hills east of the Tha Tham Bleung valley, diverting attention long enough for the Dac Cong to slip through and head directly for Skyline Ridge. By midnight on 13 February, part of a sapper company worked its way atop the southeastern end of the ridge. From there they directed recoilless rifle fire into Long Tieng, thus providing a diversion as another Dac Cong team circled south of the base and entered the valley from the direction of the king's villa. Destroying a 105mm howitzer next to the royal residence, these sappers set up a mortar and began raining rounds across Long Tieng.

Adding to the confusion, PAVN — for the first time — started firing 122mm and 140mm rockets over Skyline and into the valley. At sunup, Long Tieng was reeling from the multiple attacks by fire. Even worse, Vang Pao was absent (at Udorn for the night) and, as was customary, all Hmong units were awaiting his return before showing any tactical initiative.

In the meantime, Burr Smith, Vang Pao's case officer, was on the radio calling for air support to suppress the PAVN sappers still manning the mortar near the king's villa. As the USAF was preoccupied with Lam Son 719 in the panhandle, sorties for northern Laos had been reduced to two dozen a day. Fortunately for the Long Tieng defenders, one of those flights — an F-4 with CBU-49 cluster bombs — arrived overhead and prepared to deliver its ordnance on the North Vietnamese mortar team. Misjudging his target in the early morning fog, the pilot accidentally released his cluster bombs across the northern side of the Long Tieng valley, destroying a rice storage house, an ammunition dump, the CIA's living quarters, a mess hall and a radio station. One CIA advisor, Shep Johnson, was peppered with shrapnel. Thirty Hmong civilians were killed, another 170 wounded.

Vang Pao and Vientiane Station Chief Hugh Tovar were aboard an Air America C-123 en route from Udorn when word of the accidental bombing came over the radio. Upon landing at Long Tieng, the general immediately toured the destruction. Not all the damage was attributable to the cluster bombs: arriving at his residence, Vang Pao found the porch riddled with AK-47 fire and his second-floor bedroom partially destroyed by a B-40 round.

Fearing a second night of attack, all Americans — save for Hog Daniels — withdrew to Vientiane or Udorn. As they were leaving, the two newest Thai Unity battalions — BCs 603 and 604 — were yanked from the final phase of their Prachinburi training and flown to Long Tieng as emergency reinforcements. Both were immediately deployed atop Skyline to prevent further recoilless rifle harassment.

That night, the anticipated Vietnamese push failed to materialise. Vang Pao, however, still faced a growing array of PAVN infantry and heavy weapons moving southwest of the plain. In response, Long

While monitoring a road-watch team insertion in April 1971 along the Ho Chi Minh Trail by a CH-53 from the USAF's 21st Special Operations Squadron, a CASI Porter carrying CIA advisor Jim "Indian" Barber suffered an engine failure and ditched in a field. Landing nearby, the crew from the CH-53 rushes toward the Porter to rescue the occupants. (Photo courtesy Jerry Gilbert)

MR 3 case officer Jim "Indian" Barber (right) provides cover with an AK-47 as USAF crewmembers carry a dazed pilot from the wrecked CASI Pilatus Porter, April 1971. (Photo courtesy Jerry Gilbert)

Tieng Unit produced plans for a multi-pronged operation that would sweep from Sam Thong to Ban Na, then cut behind PAVN lines leading southwest off the PDJ.

For the operation's first prong, Vang Pao on the last day of February took delivery of one of the new Savannakhet irregular regiments, GM 31. These troops, with Hmong covering their left flank, were to walk from the western end of Skyline north to Sam Thong, then another eight kilometres northwest to the banks of the Nam Ngum. From the beginning, however, this GM experienced morale problems. On 6 March, soon after pushing past Sam Thong, elements of the regiment deserted back to Long Tieng. At that point, Colonel Thao Ly and Savannakhet Unit's chief of operations, Wil Greene, flew north and joined case officer Montana in negotiations with the rebellious unit.

Temporarily appeased, the Savannakhet troops agreed to return to the field. On 9 March, however, as the first of three 21st Special Operations Squadron choppers shuttled them into Sam Thong, the CH-53 hit the runway hard and lost its tail, spinning across the strip before burning in a gulley; killed in the crash was the pilot, co-pilot and six guerrillas. The lift was eventually concluded the next day, enabling GM 31 to reach the Nam Ngum without opposition by 20 March.

For the operation's other prongs, Long Tieng Unit was depending heavily on Unity volunteer battalions. To churn out these troops, the Unity training centre had moved earlier that year from Prachinburi to more spacious facilities 11 kilometres northwest of the Thai town of Kanchanaburi (site of the infamous Bridge on the River Kwai). Built four years earlier to train the RTA regiment preparing for deployment to South Vietnam, the Kanchanaburi camp had a four-battalion capacity. Three augmented USSF A-Teams, 44 men total, moved in as training cadre.

On 3 March, the first two Kanchanaburi-trained Unity battalions — BCs 605 and 606 — landed at Long Tieng. Together with BCs 603 and 604 still atop Skyline, the four-battalion contingent was called Task Force Singha (the Thai name for a mythical lion).

Unlike the RTA of Task Force Vang Pao, these Unity battalions from the start were intended for mobile operations, not simply static defence. Taking to the offensive, BCs 605 and 606 headed from Skyline, sweeping a path north to Sam Thong. On 15 March, Task Force Singha was augmented again, this time by BCs 601 and 602, both coming off a short leave after their initial success on the Bolovens.

Problems quickly befell the Thai. They faced not only stiff PAVN resistance, but also heavy rains and freezing nights for which they were not properly clothed. Added Mike "Hardnose" Ingham, formerly with a Marine Reconnaissance Battalion in South Vietnam and now a Unity case officer, "The Thai had been equipped too heavy and were totally unaccustomed to hauling heavy weapons like .30-calibre Browning machine guns through the mountains of MR 2."

In the midst of these early actions, Task Force Singha was joined by the first Unity artillery battalion, *Bataillon Artillerie* 635 (BA 635). Trained at the RTA Artillery Centre at Kokethiem, BA 635 and all subsequent Unity artillery battalions contained 20 officers seconded from the RTA and 380 volunteers. Each battalion was allotted a 105mm and 155mm howitzer battery of four tubes apiece.

Immediately upon arrival at Long Tieng, BA 635 personnel were ordered to take command of FSB Zebra (on Zebra Ridge) and FSB Tiger (on the west end of Skyline), both previously manned by the RTA of Task Force Vang Pao. The latter artillerymen, having completed their one-year tour in Laos, moved back to Long Tieng for repatriation. Yet to be replaced by Unity artillery elements were FSB Eagle at Sam Thong and FSB Puncher at Ban Na. Of these, FSB Puncher had been surrounded since February by elements of PAVN's 316th Division. By the end of March, pressure increased as the 165th Regiment/312th Division joined the siege. Unfortunately for the Puncher defenders, tactical air support at the time was in a downward spiral as the USAF diverted assets for use against North Vietnam (the 1968 bombing halt having been temporarily lifted). Moreover, those fighter-bombers that did arrive over MR 2 were stymied by a thick burning-season haze.

The situation inside Ban Na growing desperate, BCs 605 and 606 on 29 March were ordered to relieve pressure by capturing Hill 1663, an isolated highpoint four kilometres southwest of Ban Na. Two days later, elements of GM 23 arrived in the vicinity with a 4.2-inch mortar; in addition, a 105mm howitzer from FSB Zebra was lifted in for fire support. The Unity howitzer and Hmong mortar linked up to form FSB White Horse, offering a rescue buoy in the event the Puncher garrison effected a breakout.

Within two days after FSB White Horse was established, the Thai volunteers were ordered to force their way northeast toward Ban Na as a diversion. As they were in the final stages before leaving, however, a USAF F-4 on 3 April accidentally dropped a 2,000-pound bomb on BCs 605 and 606. Sixteen Thai were killed, including the BC 605 commander and a BC 606 company commander. As a result of this incident, all Unity battalions were subsequently assigned FAGs to better coordinate air support.

The diversionary operation falling by the wayside, FSB Puncher held on for three more days. Then, after having received permission from Vang Pao for an orderly withdrawal, the entire garrison slipped through the Ban Na perimeter at 2100 hours on 6 April.

MR 3 case officer Jim "Indian" Barber rests inside a CH-53 from the US Air Force 21st Special Operations Squadron as he is lifted from the crash site of a CASI Pilatus Porter, April 1971. His injuries were sustained when a metal flight log hit him in the face during the crash. (Photo courtesy Jerry Gilbert)

Having thus gained control over Ban Na, PAVN was left holding all the initiative southwest of the PDJ. In the Ban Na sector was the 165th Regiment/312th Division. Still uncommitted south of the plain was the 209th Regiment/312th Division. This substantial North Vietnamese force, Vang Pao knew, would remain a direct threat to Long Tieng for at least two more months until the onset of the monsoon rains.

Of even greater concern was the fact that — although American air sorties for northern Laos had been raised to 60 a day — the U.S. was set to halve that number after 1 July. This was because the prevailing wisdom in Washington was that Vang Pao should launch no rainy season offensive for 1971 in order to foster a more conciliatory atmosphere for peace negotiations.

Vang Pao, then, faced a race against time, needing to evict PAVN from southwest of the PDJ before air support was cut and Washington had a chance to level criticism. To do this, the general first looked to bolster his defensive line running from the Unity position near Ban Na, southeast to the RTA garrison on Phou Long Mat, then further southeast to the Hmong outpost at Padong.

Near Ban Na and Phou Long Mat, fresh Unity battalions were introduced. This allowed the remaining elements of the RTA's Task Force Vang Pao to complete its one-year tour and return home. With the departure of all RTA units by May 1971, Task Force Singha from that point forward assumed the name Task Force Vang Pao.

At Padong, defences were provided by GMs 22 and 21, supported by a 105mm howitzer. On 18 April, two GM 22 battalions extended the line 15 kilometres southeast. Five days later, Hmong irregulars were lifted northwest to the foot of PAVN-held Phou Phasai. Failing on their first attempt, the Hmong managed to wrest hold over part of that mountain by month's end.

Behind this forward line, PAVN pockets remained. One of the largest was clinging to the southwestern foot of Zebra Ridge. To clear this vicinity, Vang Pao turned to Savannakhet's GM 31, which had been sitting idle during March along the banks of the Nam Ngum. Recalled to Sam Thong, elements of the regiment by 1 April had secured positions eight kilometres to the east. After these initial gains, the irregulars slowed to a crawl in the face of determined PAVN resistance at the base of the Zebra Ridge. After six frustrating weeks, GM 31 at long last swept Zebra's crest — only to find it was defended by just a platoon. Having completed its mission, the regiment on 21 May departed overland to Long Tieng and was lifted back to Nong Saphong.

While PAVN still controlled a handful of other pockets southwest of the plain, by late April it looked increasingly like the combination of airstrikes, impending monsoons and RLG ground operations had forced PAVN to begin a slow pull-out toward North Vietnam. By 27 April, Vang Pao felt sufficiently confident to bring his wives — evacuated in March — back to Long Tieng. Three days later, PAVN officially terminated Campaign 74B.

6

DEFYING WASHINGTON

Though pressure eased up for the time being, Vang Pao found little reason for cheer. After all, he knew that air support was to be cut 1 July; that diehard PAVN elements southwest of the PDJ needed to be evicted; and that the Hmong Council of Elders would lose faith in his leadership abilities if he failed to go on the offensive during the upcoming rainy season.

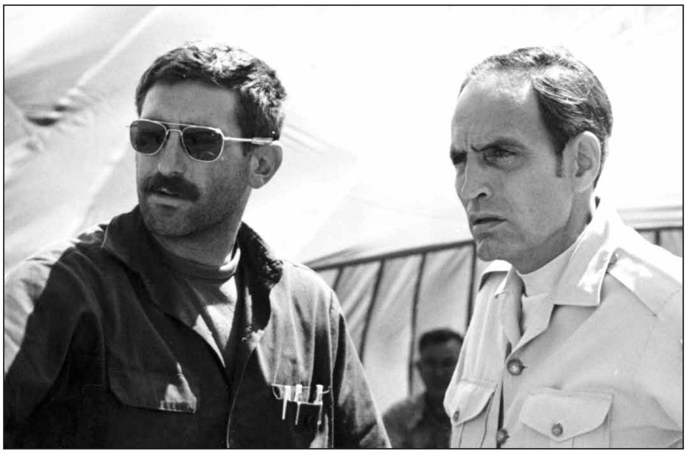
On the other hand, the U.S. generals in Saigon were singularly against an MR 2 offensive, supporting instead a holding action in the prelude to a possible ceasefire. Though Saigon did not have jurisdiction over ground operations in MR 2, they did hold great sway over the allocation of U.S. tactical air support. In this, the generals were insisting that the majority of sorties dedicated for Laos be used along the Trail corridor.

Saigon also had considerable influence in Washington. It came as no surprise, then, that Washington declared its opposition to a Kou Kiet-type monsoon offensive, advocating instead that Vang Pao should capture the hills overlooking the PDJ from the west, thereby holding dominant terrain features without having to invest in defending the plain itself. Washington also insisted that American airpower in MR 2 be used to interdict PAVN supply lines, not as close air support for paramilitary ground operations.

For its part, the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane — unofficially — had its heart with Vang Pao. They correctly realised that MR 2 forces could not withstand another siege on Long Tieng, especially if PAVN was able to start the next dry season with some of its forces still southwest of the PDJ. Souvanna Phouma, too, had come to the same conclusion and was giving Vang Pao his fullest backing to stage a monsoon drive.

In the face of these contradictory pressures, Vang Pao paid lip service to Washington, then went ahead and sketched out plans for a near repeat of Kou Kiet's opening phase. Just as in 1969, this operation was to begin with a foray east of the PDJ designed to constipate Route 7 traffic. Vang Pao now was giving that assignment to 45 of his Commando Raiders, who would be parachuted at night from an Air America DHC-6 Twin Otter into a drop zone eight kilometres from the targeted road.

Also like in 1969, the operation's primary thrust was to come from the south out of Padong. Defending that site was GM 21 under the new command of Lieutenant Colonel Xay Dang Xiong. Beginning 1 May, the regiment was lifted by Air America choppers to Khang Kho, 10 kilometres north and midway the distance to the PDJ. The troop lift completed two days later, GM 21 waited as its sister unit, GM 22, shifted to Padong at month's end. Plans then called for the two regiments to make their way north toward the Lat Sen airfield. From there, elements of GM 21 would go west and seize Phou Seu, the twin-peaked mountain overlooking the southwestern corner of the plain.



Jerry "Hog" Daniels and Vientiane Station Chief Hugh Tovar at Bouamlong, 1971. Serving as an MR 2 case officer since 1966, during which time he developed an especially close relationship with Vang Pao, Daniels replaced Wil Greene as MR 2 Chief of Operations in 1971. (via James Parker)

MR 2 commander Vang Pao (right) is briefed by Bouamlong case officer Dave "Redcoat" Campbell following a six-week siege, 1971. The hole in the map above Campbell's head was from a PAVN 122mm rocket fragment that perforated the office. (Photo courtesy Dave Campbell)

GM 22, in a repeat of Kou Kiet, would head northeast and take Phou Theung.

Meanwhile, GM 23, which had been roaming the area between Moung Soui and Ban Na since the end of the previous year, would make its way southeast to Phou Seu and link up with GM 21. If successful, these moves would give the general a solid arc across the southern plain — without seriously violating Washington's stated limitations.

To begin the operation, Vang Pao on 3 June airlifted a GM 21 battalion from Khang Kho to the base of Phou Seu. The following day, the remaining eight Hmong battalions headed for the plain from the south and west. While determined PAVN resistance frustrated the GM 21 battalion at Phou Seu, the remainder of the regiment encountered few North Vietnamese as it traversed the foothills and marshes off the southern PDJ.

Covering GM 21's right flank, GM 22 by 6 June had reached Phou Louang, a highpoint on the southeast rim of the plain. On 12 June, BC 604 and the two 105mm howitzers from FSB Tiger were airlifted to Phou Louang and renamed FSB Cobra, allowing GM 22 to join GM 21 in the push toward Lat Sen. By the third week of June, the Hmong occupied the village and its nearby dirt runway against little opposition. Without pause, GM 22 continued to Phou Theung; two 105mm howitzers with Hmong crews were soon lifted to the foot of that mountain for support.

Before further progress was realised, PAVN lashed out. On 18 June, North Vietnamese infantry overwhelmed both 105mm howitzer positions at Phou Theung; the following morning, two PAVN tanks moved forward and destroyed the guns. After that, the Vietnamese grew silent, allowing the Hmong to push to Lat Houang.

At Phou Seu, PAVN offered a more determined defence. Needing to resolve this standoff, Vang Pao turned to his newest regiment, GM 24. A patchwork of Hmong units from across the entirety of northern Laos, GM 24 was symptomatic of a fast-shrinking recruitment pool. Selected as regimental commander was Lieutenant Colonel Moua Sue, himself a veteran of earlier operations at Nam Yu and Xieng Lom. Their CIA case officer was Kayak, who had just completed his assignment as liaison with the RTA's Task Force Vang Pao.

For the PDJ operation, GM 24 was choppered to Khang Kho; from there it walked north to Lat Sen just as that village was being vacated by GM 21. Sweeping the Lat Sen vicinity for a couple of days, GM 24 then headed west toward Phou Seu. Fortunately for Moua Sue and his troops, PAVN finally had decided to cut its losses and abandon its tenuous hold southwest of the plain. At the cost of just two dead, the new regiment easily grabbed Phou Seu's twin peaks one day before the end of the month. Three days later, BC 610, fresh out of Kanchanaburi training, arrived to garrison the mountain.

With the capture of Phou Seu, Vang Pao's defensive line ran east to Lat Sen, then Phou Theung. While having kept to the spirit of Washington's limitations thus far, the general, both surprised and tempted by the relative ease of his advance, dropped all pretences of a limited offensive action and instead substituted plans for a full-blown multi-pronged repeat of Kou Kiet. By this time, Washington had softened its opposition, and had even been successfully lobbied by the embassy to dedicate all northern Laos sorties as close air support for the effort.

On 1 July, then, Vang Pao's monsoon season offensive began in earnest. Over the next week, GM 22 headed down Route 4 toward Xieng Khouangville. At the same time, BG 224 was choppered from Lat Houang seven kilometres north to Lima 22, the central PDJ airfield that figured so prominently last time Vang Pao held the plain. To act as a reserve, BC 608 on 2 July was loaded aboard Air America choppers and air-assaulted into Ban Na — only to find it abandoned by PAVN. BC 606 joined them later that week.

Before further gains were made, on 7 July North Vietnamese gunners unleashed a wave of artillery rounds from the Lat Bouak intersection. In addition, Hanoi ordered two regiments and some PT-76 tanks back to the plain, some of which were used to occupy Phou Keng, the dominant terrain feature on the western PDJ. These moves, unprecedented for the middle of the monsoon season, prompted Vang Pao to call into play GM 23 from the west. Ordered to seize Phou Keng on 7 July, GM 23 reached the mountain by the following day; after five days of fighting, the regiment finally cleared the summit. Immediately thereafter, BC 606, one of the two reserve battalions at Ban Na, arrived to garrison Phou Keng; this allowed GM 23 to move east and, after replacing its lacklustre commander, by month's end got a foothold on Phou San.

Meantime, Unity infantry and artillery were pouring onto the PDJ. This allowed for creation of two Unity fire support bases: FSB Mustang just northwest of Phou Theung and an adjacent site named FSB Lion.

By the close of July, Vang Pao's offensive began to sputter, leaving the general with a tenuous hold over only half the PDJ. To bolster his defences, Unity artillery were lifted on 12 August by CH-54 Skycranes to Phou Keng, forming FSB King Kong. He also had his newest regiment, GM 25, manoeuvre to the south of the plain.

Still, PAVN kept up the pressure. Most serious was the situation around Xieng Khouangville, where a Vietnamese attack on GM 22 resulted in the death of the regimental commander.

Facing this situation, the Hmong Council of Elders gathered on 30 August to ponder their fate. Disturbed by what they called a lack of American support and irritated by restrictions placed on Vang Pao by the U.S. Embassy, the Hmong chieftains threatened (again) a mass exodus to Thailand.

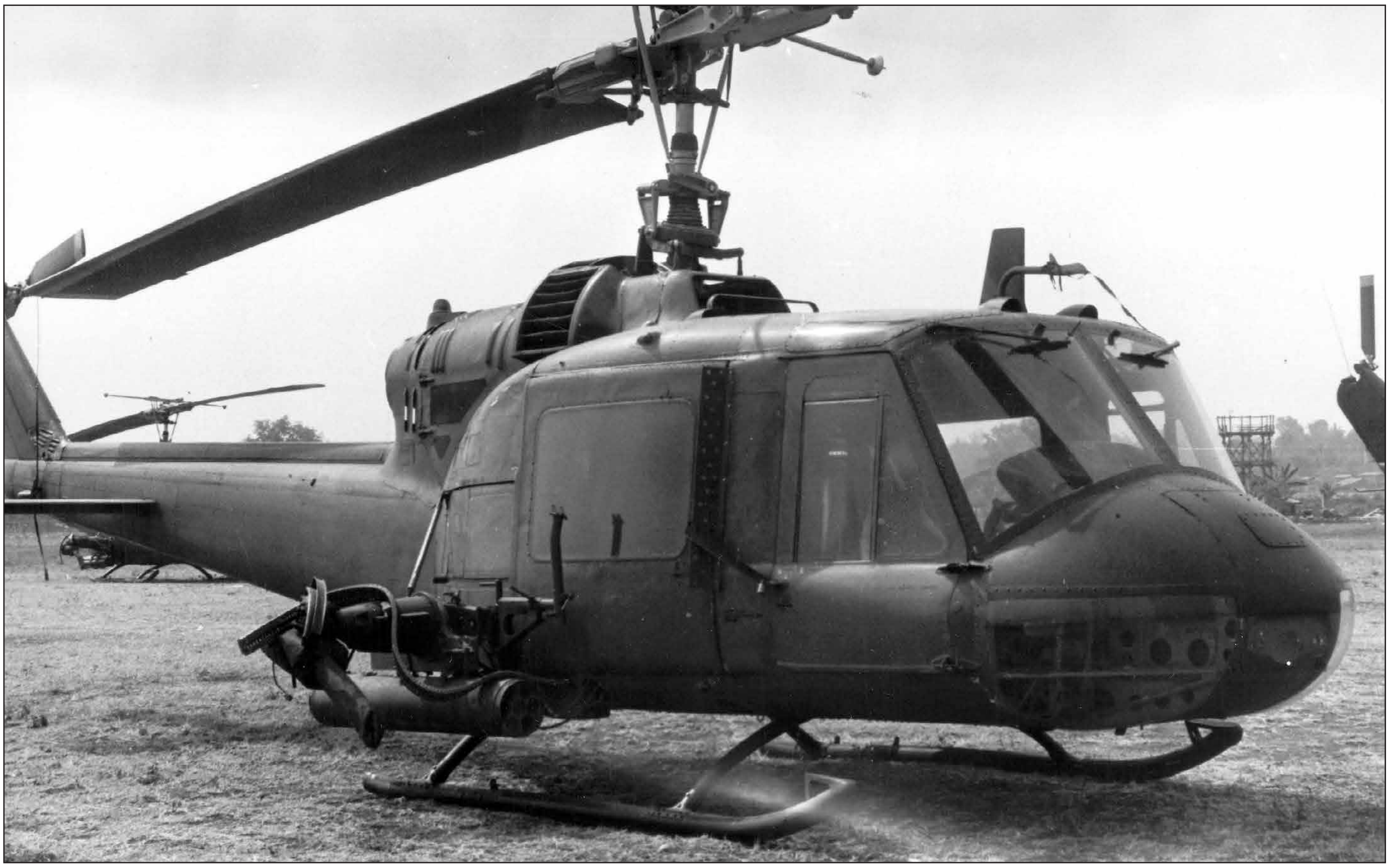
For his part, Vang Pao flew to Bangkok on 2 September to temporarily escape the pressures of the war. Unlike his Kou Kiet sweep two years earlier, PAVN this time had never been fully evicted from the entire plain. Too, recent performances by the Hmong frontline troops instilled little confidence. This was evident on 15 September when a relatively minor PAVN mortar and recoilless rifle attack had managed to temporarily disperse all of GM 23.

Still, Vang Pao's defensive buffer was infinitely better than it had been going into the last dry season. With a nod from the U.S. Embassy, he went ahead with planning for a concerted defence of the PDJ such that, if and when PAVN launched a counteroffensive, the North Vietnamese would pay dearly for every kilometre of real estate gained.

Central to the general's dry season defences was Unity's contribution. Atop the already substantial Thai presence on the plain, Long Tieng Unit was pouring in still more volunteer infantrymen and heavy weapons. This led to the creation of two additional Unity firebases: FSB Stingray at Phou Seu and FSB Panther near the Ban Thang airfield. In addition, a Hmong 105mm howitzer was lifted to the high ground 200 meters east of FSB Lion.

By late September, Long Tieng Unit had a seemingly solid network of interlocking artillery bases covering the PDJ, all within howitzer range of at least one other FSB. To better manage USAF close air support for these bases, Thai civilian volunteers selected for their English language ability were sent to Udorn RTAFB for FAG instruction from an 11-man USAF Combat Control Team. Upon graduation, one Thai FAG was assigned to each Thai battalion.

As a sweetener for the Thai defenders, Long Tieng Unit arranged for Unity to get its own armed helicopter unit to assist



In 1969, a handful of UH-1C Hueys were upgraded with L-13 engines (redesignated as the UH-1M) and deployed to South Vietnam as night attack ships with the U.S. Army. Two years later, 10 UH-1Ms were sent to Udorn and flown by Thai crews in support of Unity forces in Laos. Outfitted with the M-21 minigun/rocket system, their call-sign was White Horse. (Photo courtesy Tom Lum)

with medical evacuations. During the fall of 1971, 10 U.S. Army UH-1M helicopters were loaned; each was equipped with the M21 combination of two outrigged 7.62mm miniguns and a pair of seven-shot rocket pods.

To fly this chopper contingent, 26 Thai pilots were dispatched to Vung Tau, South Vietnam, for eight weeks of familiarisation flights. Once completed, they rendezvoused with 10 choppers at Kontum, then headed for Thailand. As this theoretically violated the 1970 Fulbright Amendment — which prohibited the use of Thai pilots in U.S. aircraft — the choppers were ostensibly described as Lao aircraft in order to circumvent Congressional prohibitions.

Based out of Udorn RTAFB, the UH-1M crews — call-signed White Horse — began flying daily into MR 2. Later, White Horse crews also began escorting supply convoys along Route 23 in MR 4. By dusk, all White Horse choppers were required to return to Udorn RTAFB.

Sayasila

The second half of 1971 could not have started better for Pakse Unit. On 1 July, as part of sweeping leadership changes announced by the FAR General Staff, Colonel Soutchay was now to be commander of MR 4. With the fresh blood he brought into office, Pakse Unit looked to salvage a slice of the Bolovens during the current rainy season.

By the end of the first week of July, Pakse Unit inked plans for the retaking of three major MR 4 objectives within a week. By mid-month, their proposed campaign was slightly reworked into two phases: in the first stage, a Savannakhet GM would seize Saravane; in the second stage, Paksong would be liberated. The operation was set to begin at the end of July under the name Sayasila, the Lao Theung term for the eastern Bolovens.

Selected to open Sayasila's was GM 31. On the morning of 27 July, the regiment was shuttled down to PS 47, the new GZ 3 headquarters, in preparation for an airlift into Saravane. Before dawn the next morning, a Commando Raider team from MR 3 was inserted on the Saravane runway, southwest of the town. At 0700 hours, a 13-ship CH-53 armada arrived at PS 47. GM 31 troops filed aboard and the first shuttle lifted off for the 30-minute trip east. By 0830 hours, all 1,290 men of GM 31 were on the outskirts of Saravane. Strike aircraft circled overhead but could identify no lucrative targets: the town was deserted. That night, the irregulars declared Saravane officially liberated.

At 0920 hours the next day, Sayasila began its second phase as FAR and Neutralist troops were landed close to Paksong. They were supported by a Unity 105mm battery named FSB Lightning, which on 20 July had been airlifted to KM 21 (21 kilometres east along Route 23 from Pakse). But Thai howitzer fire, combined with strong air support, still could not weaken the stiff PAVN defences. At that point, Unity joined the campaign in earnest. Headquartered in the northern outskirts of Pakse, the MR 4 Unity contingent, named Task Force Phasouk, dispatched two newly graduated infantry battalions, BCs 613 and 614, to reinforce the RLG frontline at Ban Phakkout. They were joined soon thereafter by the original Unity pair, BCs 601 and 602.

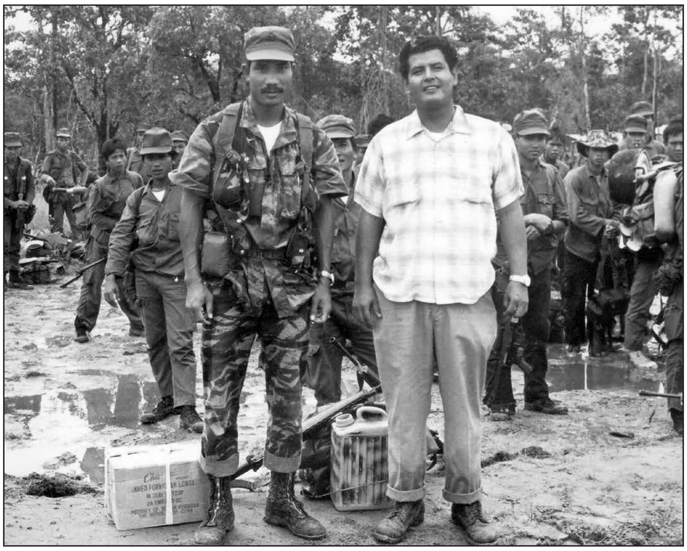
With the Thai and Neutralists consolidating their hold over Ban Phakkout, FAR infantry began moving east on 8 August toward the next Route 23 benchmark, a USAID-funded agricultural station. Finding the site unoccupied, the FAR battalions continued east, only to have their advance stymied by well-entrenched PAVN. A ten-day stalemate ensued, eventually forcing Soutchay to call in his own MR 4 irregulars.

Members of GM 31 at the PS 47 launch site prior to heliborne insertion into Saravane during Operation Sayasila, 28 July 1971. (Author's collection)

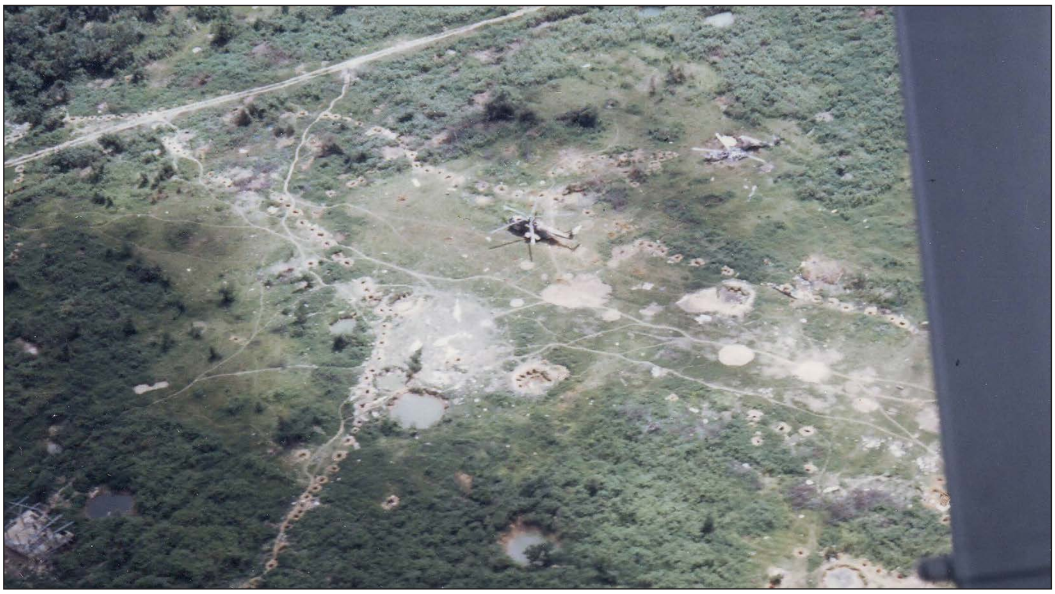
Savannakhet paramilitary officer Ron "Fuzzy Face" Bogen with GM 31 at the PS 47 launch site prior to Operation Sayasila, 28 July 1971. (Author's collection)

Since June 1971, the MR 4 irregular program had been in the midst of a major reorganisation. With the collapse of the eastern Bolovens, nearly all of the region's paramilitary forces had regrouped west. With this critical mass, Pakse Unit looked to borrow the Savannakhet template and remould its SGU battalions into 300-man BGs. Accordingly, three battalions were assembled for a four-month retraining cycle at the Wat Phu camp (PS 46). Before they had a chance to graduate, the three were deployed in mid-August to reinforce the Sayasila drive toward Paksong.

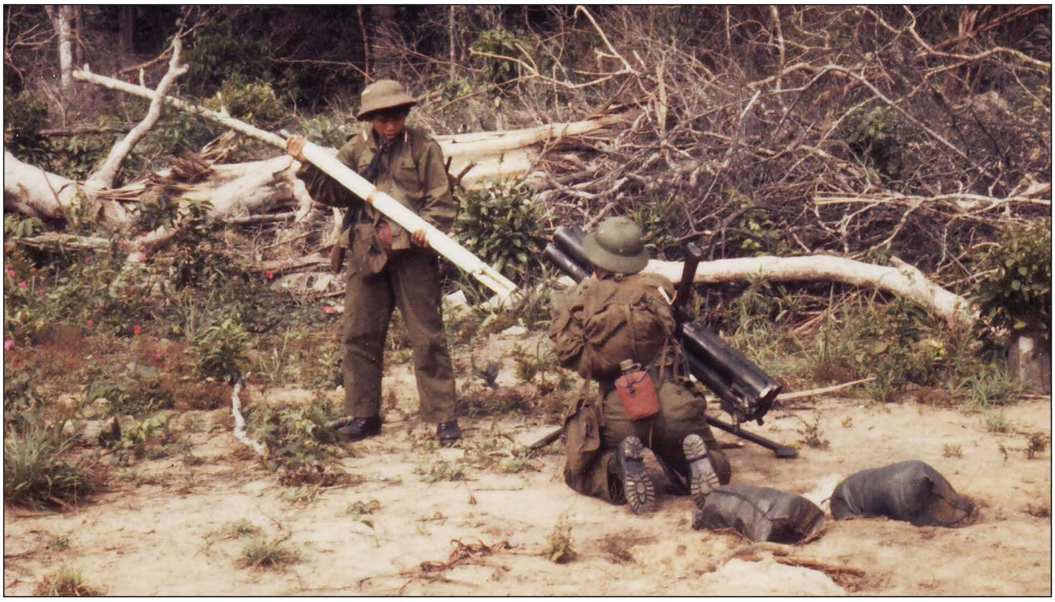
The renewed campaign quickly proved a disaster. Failing to synchronise their movements, every advance was quickly parried by the PAVN 9th Regiment. By 1 September, with Sayasila's second phase dead in the water, Soutchay and Pakse Unit knew they would have to act fast against Paksong or else wait for the next rainy season. Desperate, they again sought help from familiar sources: the USAF and Savannakhet Unit. For its part, the USAF agreed to allocate 40 tactical sorties a day for MR 4 through 5 September, then 46 daily sorties from 6-25 September. Savannakhet Unit, meanwhile, consented to the


Savannakhet training officer Nick Zapata with GM 31 at the PS 47 launch site, 28 July 1971. (Author's collection)

A member of the 1,265-man GM 31 following the capture of Saravane during Operation Sayasila, July 1971. (Author's collection)

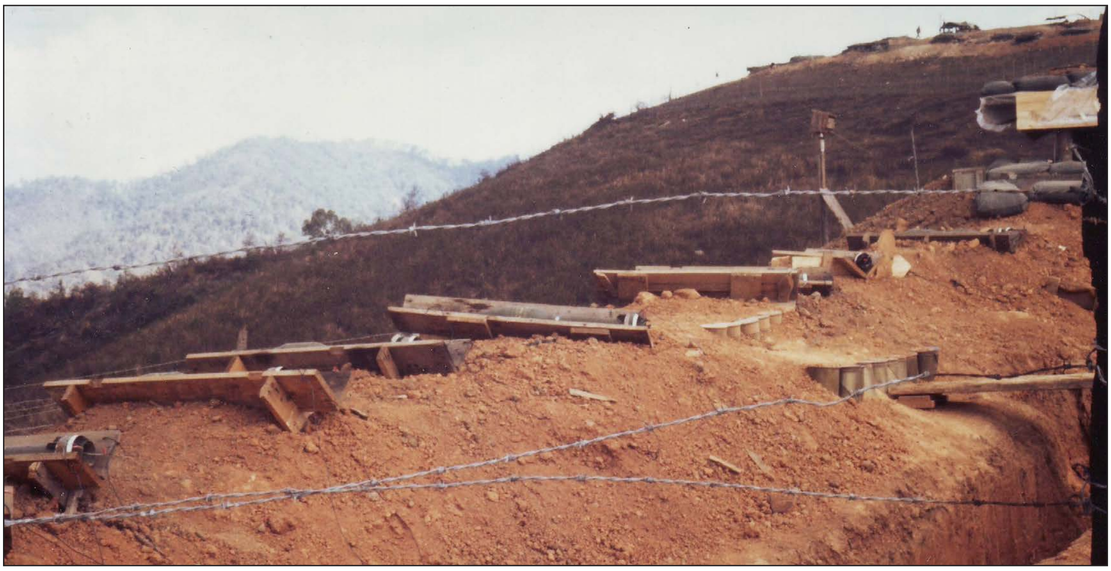


During the final phase of Operation Junction City Junior in October 1969, helicopters from the 20th Special Operations Squadron attempted to infiltrate an additional guerrilla battalion into the Moung Phine airfield. Enemy fire shot down two CH-3s, both of which were still where they crashed several months later. (Vic Williams via Jim Morrison)



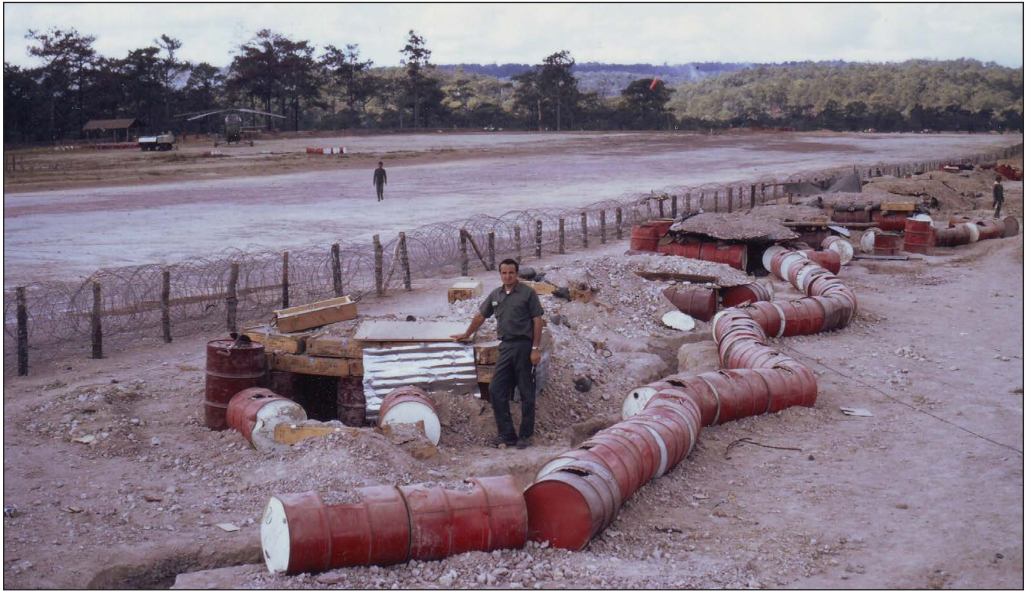
Commando Raiders disguised as PAVN demonstrate a 2.75-inch rocket pod at their PS 44 training base, November 1970. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

Commando Raiders armed with M16s and M79 grenade launchers assemble at PS 44 during an inspection tour by CIA Deputy Director Robert Cushman, November 1970. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)



As the last line of defence around FSB Puncher at Ban Na, the RTA assembled wooden troughs loaded with 3.5-inch rockets rigged to ignite electronically. In the event the base was about to be overrun, the rockets could be fired by remote control. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

Chuck "Thao Heng" Gutensohn with Ting Davong (left) from the 3rd SGU Battalion atop PS 26 following Operation Honourable Dragon, September 1970. (Photo courtesy Chuck Gutensohn)

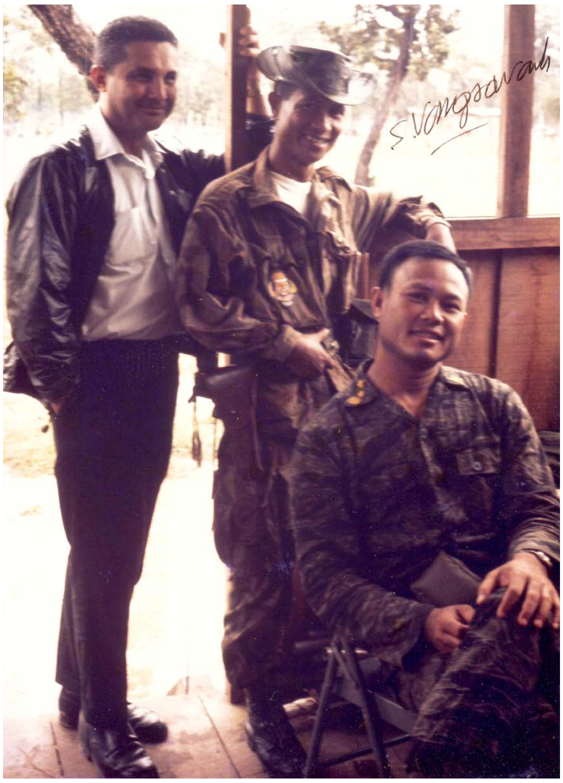


Chuck "Thao Heng" Gutensonh in the trenchwork at PS 22, the major guerrilla staging base on the east edge of the Bolovens Plateau, late 1970. An Air America H-34 is parked in the background. (Photo courtesy Chuck Gutensohn)

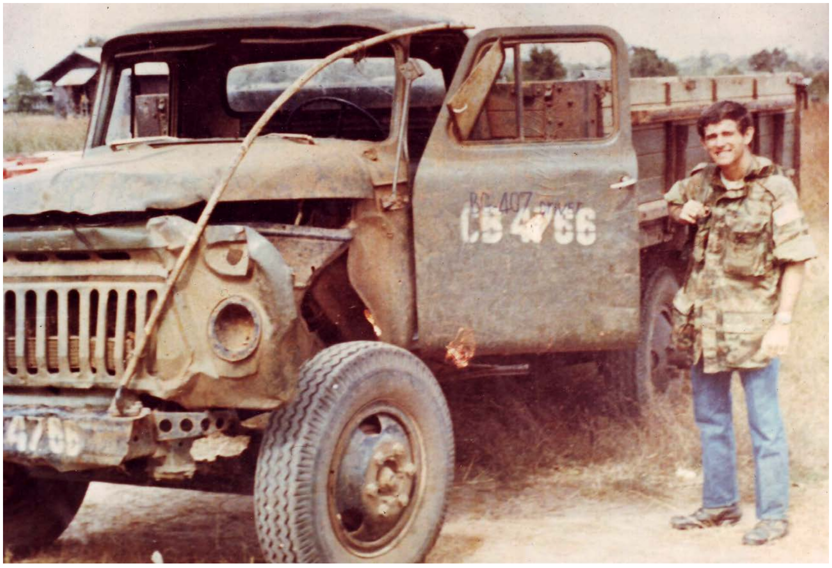
CIA Deputy Director Robert Cushman and Vientiane Station Chief Hugh Tovar review the first Cambodian battalion training at PS 18 under Project Copper, November 1970. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

An Air America Bell 205 escorts Vientiane Station Chief Hugh Tovar during a tour of MR 2, early 1971. The photo gives an indication of the mountainous terrain surrounding the PDJ and lighter cloud cover that was atypical of the dry season. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

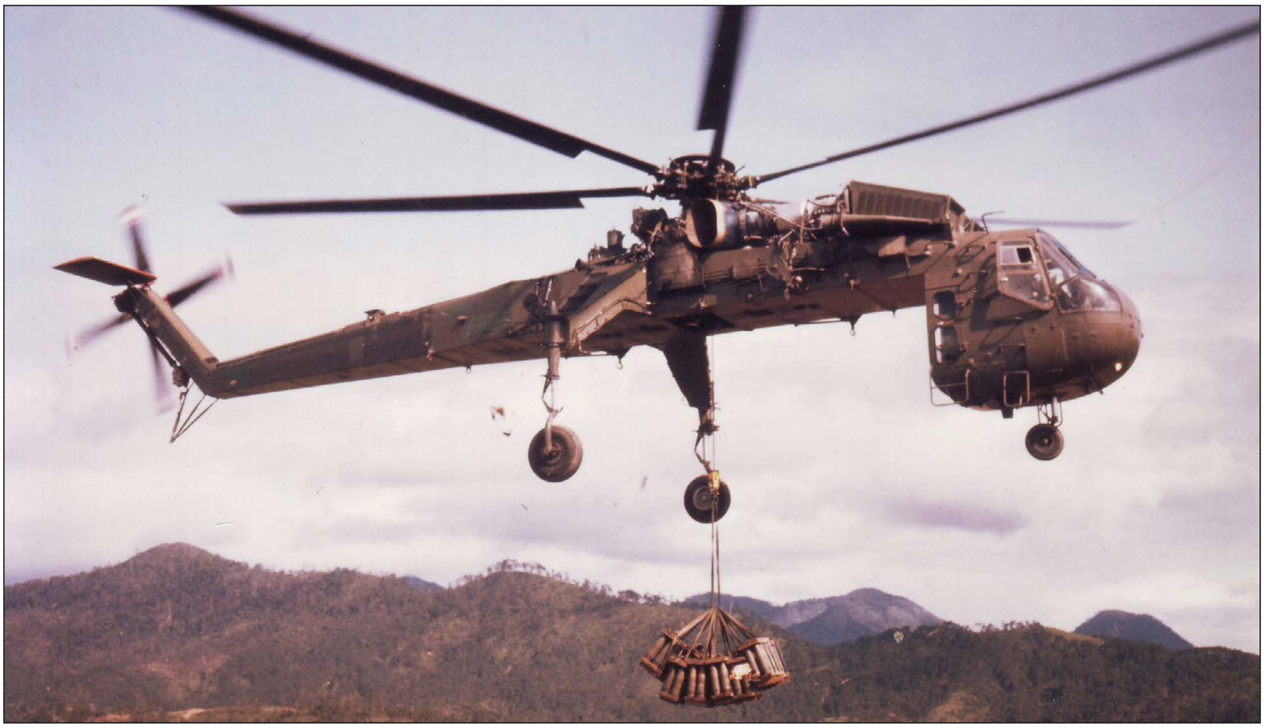
GM 21 case officer George "Digger" O'Dell and GM 22 case officer Tom "Ringo" Matthews on the PDJ in mid-1971. The Hmong officers are Colonel Sourya (Vang Pao's chief of staff) and the GM 21 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Tu Long Yang. (Photo courtesy Mike Ingham)



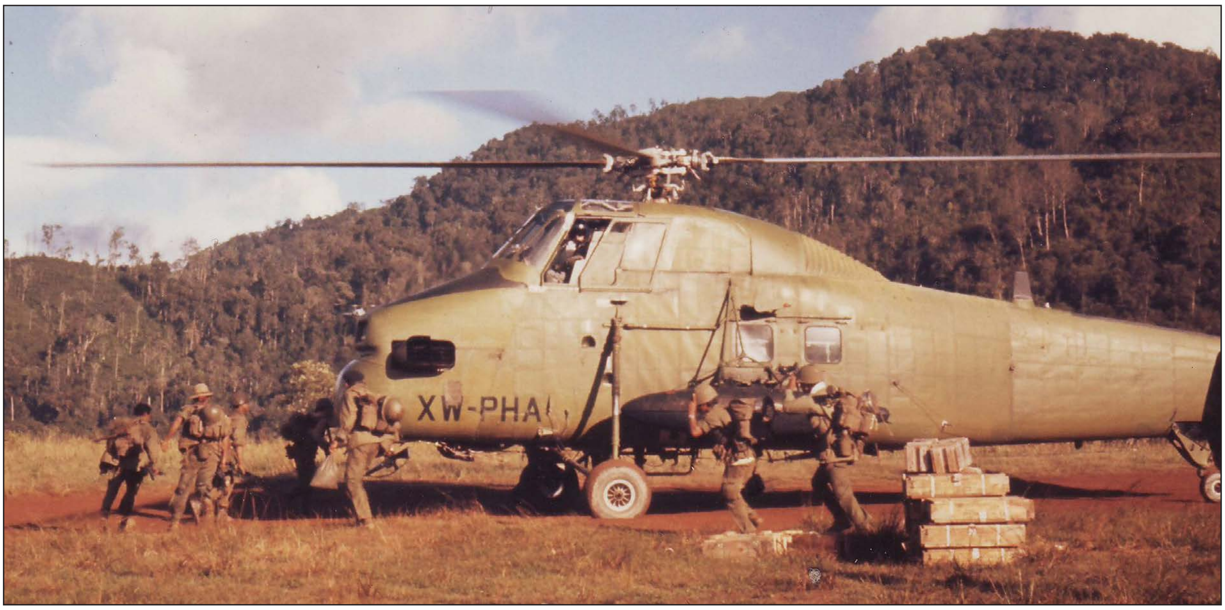
Pakse Unit Chief Carl Jenkins in 1971 with two of the highest-rated colonels in Laos: MR 3 guerrilla chief of staff Thao Ly and MR 4 guerrilla chief of staff Soutchay Vongsavanh. Thao Ly wears the MR 3 Commando Raider insignia on his right chest. Both were promoted to brigadier general during September 1971 after Thao Ly was named head of the FAR 2nd Strike Division and Soutchay became the MR 4 commander. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)



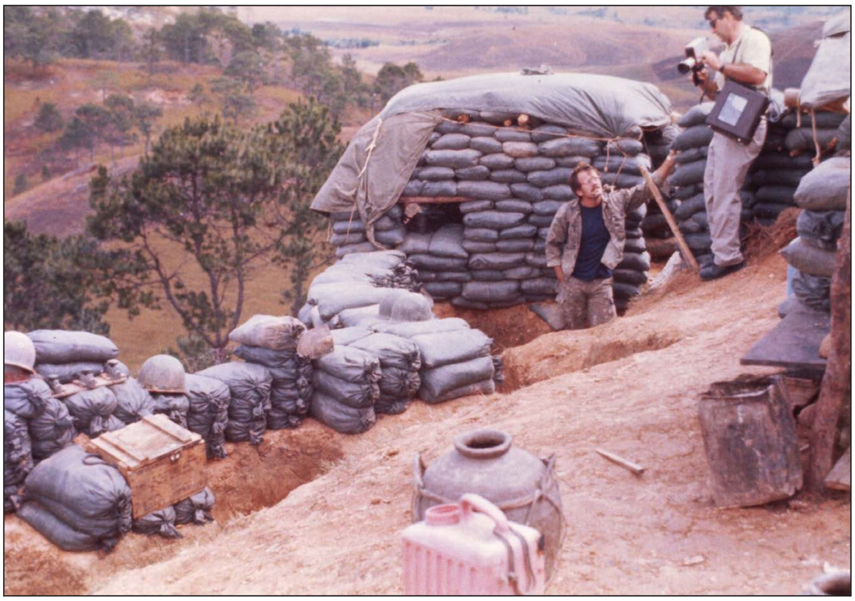
GM 41 case officer Leon "Khamsing" Williamson next to a destroyed PAVN GAZ-53 truck on the Bolovens, 1971. (Photo via James Morrison)



An unmarked CH-54 Skycrane (known in Laos by the call-sign Hurricane) from the U.S. Army's 1st Aviation Brigade lifts ammunition to Fire Support Base (FSB) Mustang, August 1971. The U.S. Army occasionally loaned Skycranes with crews for specific missions beyond the capability of Air America's rotary-wing assets. When used on such missions, all U.S. service and national markings were overpainted. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

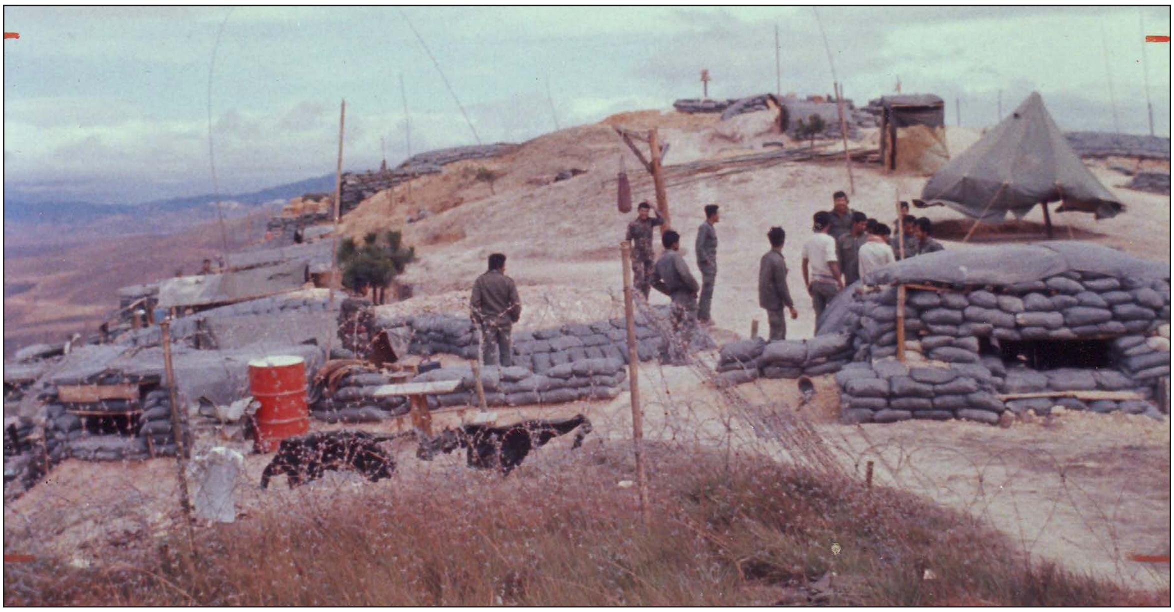


An Air America S-58T Twin Pac shuttles troops and supplies near Pa Doung (Lima Site 5). This chopper arrived in March 1971 and was the first of five H-34s converted to turbine engines at Air America's Udorn facilities. During its first few months in operation this aircraft was painted in the traditional Air America blue and silver colour scheme, but this quickly gave way to an overall olive drab. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

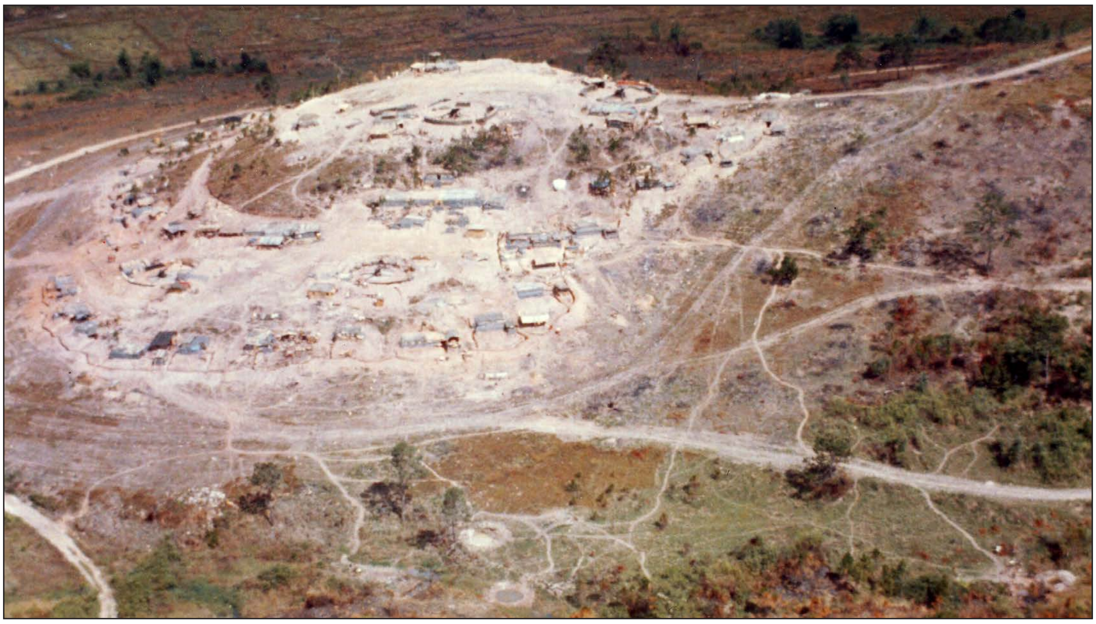


Unity case officer Mike "Hardnose" Ingham (left) surveys one of the interlocking Thai FSBs on the PDJ, late 1971. (Photo courtesy Chuck Campbell)

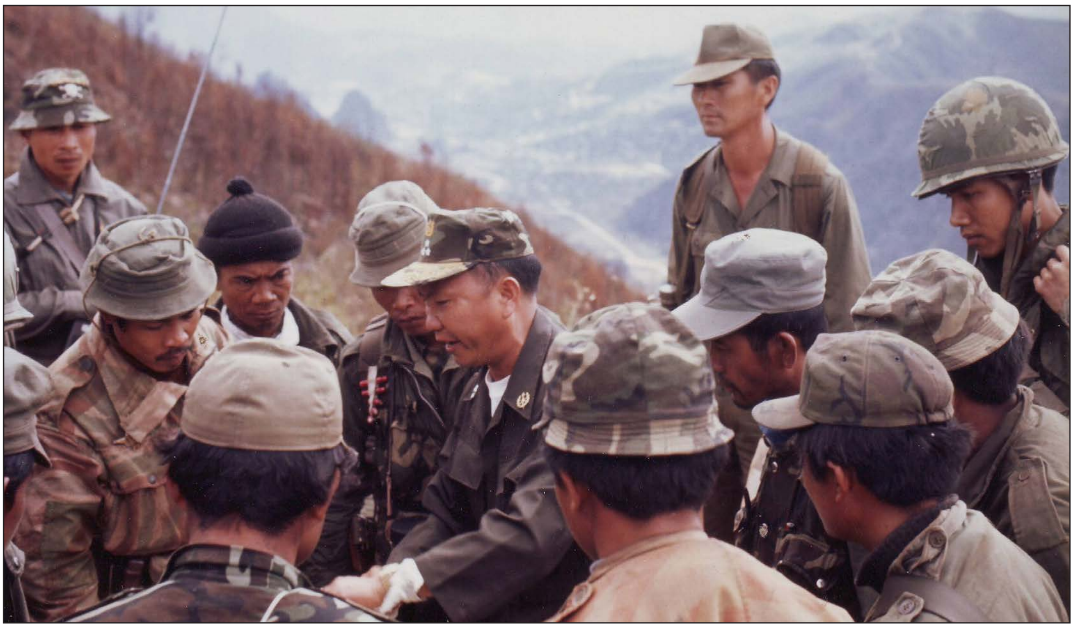
Unity advisor Mike "Hardnose" Ingham inspects the outer perimeter of FSB Mustang, September 1971. In the background is an Air America S-58T Twin Pac. (Photo courtesy Mike Ingham)



FSB Mustang at Finger Ridge, September 1971. (Photo courtesy Chuck Campbell)



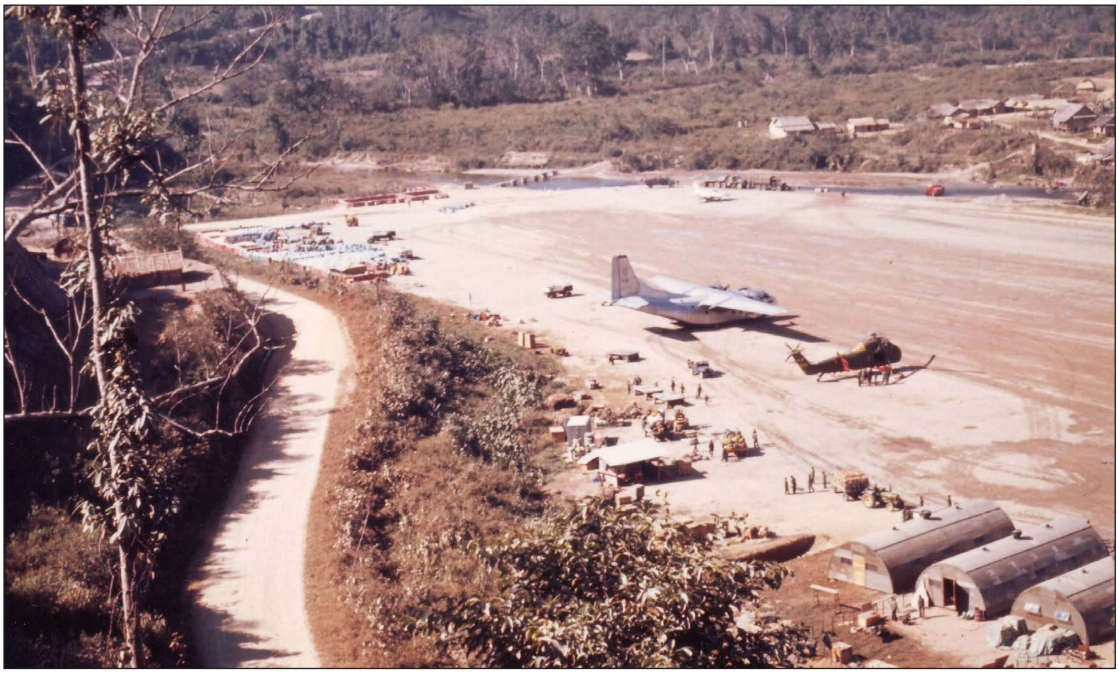
FSB Lion atop Phou Theung, September 1971. (Photo courtesy Chuck Campbell)



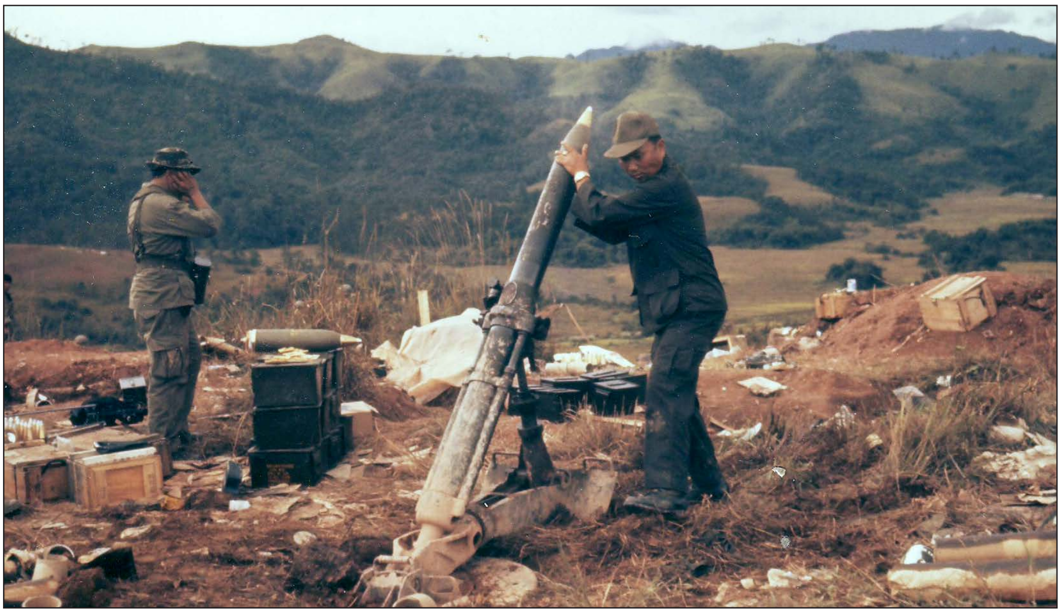
General Vang Pao discusses operations to recover Skyline Ridge with Major Chanh Nosavan (left), the commander of GM 30, mid-January 1972. Nosavan wears a French 1956 camouflage smock. The town of Long Tieng is visible in the background. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

Major Chanh Nosavan, commander of GM 30, wounded on Skyline Ridge, 19 January 1972. Visible on the lower left is the GM 30 advisor, Eli "Supermex" Chavez. At the direction of the US ambassador, Western journalists were allowed to visit Long Tieng that day to see the scope of American assistance in the defence of Long Tieng. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

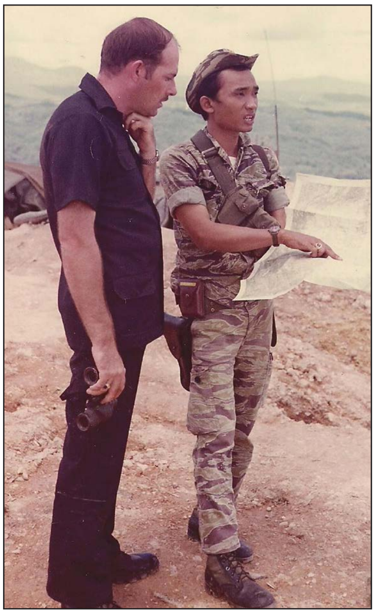
GM 21 advisor George "Digger" O'Dell and the GM 21 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Xay Dang Xiong, at Bouamlong, March 1972. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)



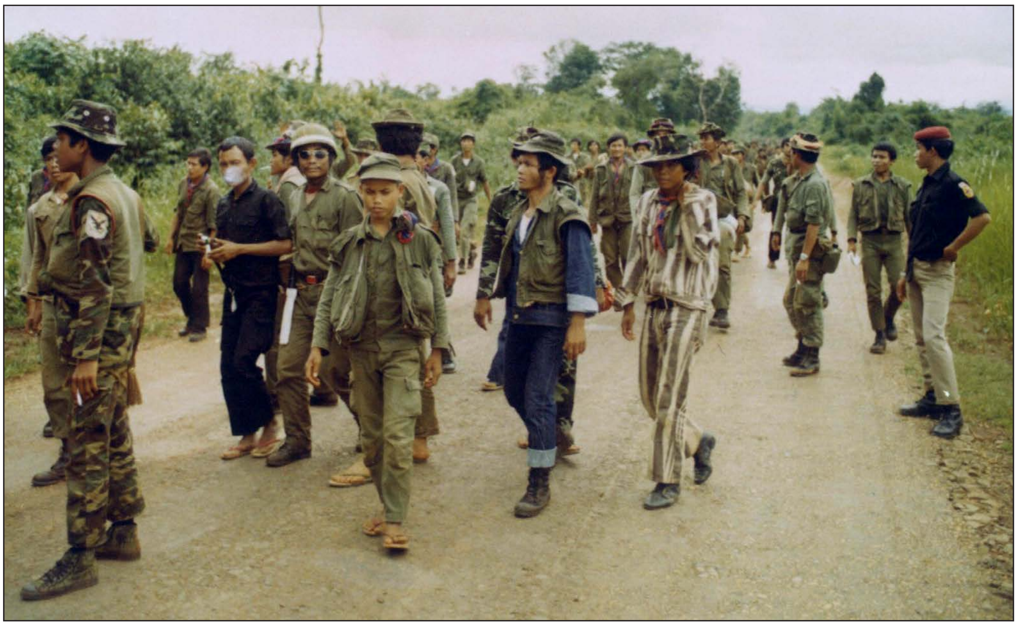
The runway at Ban Son (Lima Site 272), in early 1972. Due to intense PAVN pressure on Long Tieng, during the second quarter of 1972 the CIA shifted its MR 2 logistical support base to Ban Son. This lasted only a few short weeks, as heavy flooding at Ban Son forced the CIA to shift yet again. On 22 July they settled on Vang Vieng, the site of a Neutralist military camp alongside Route 13 and about 150 kilometres north of Vientiane. As the security situation at Long Tieng improved over the second half of the year, the rear support base remained at Vang Vieng but day-to-day requirements were kept at Long Tieng. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)



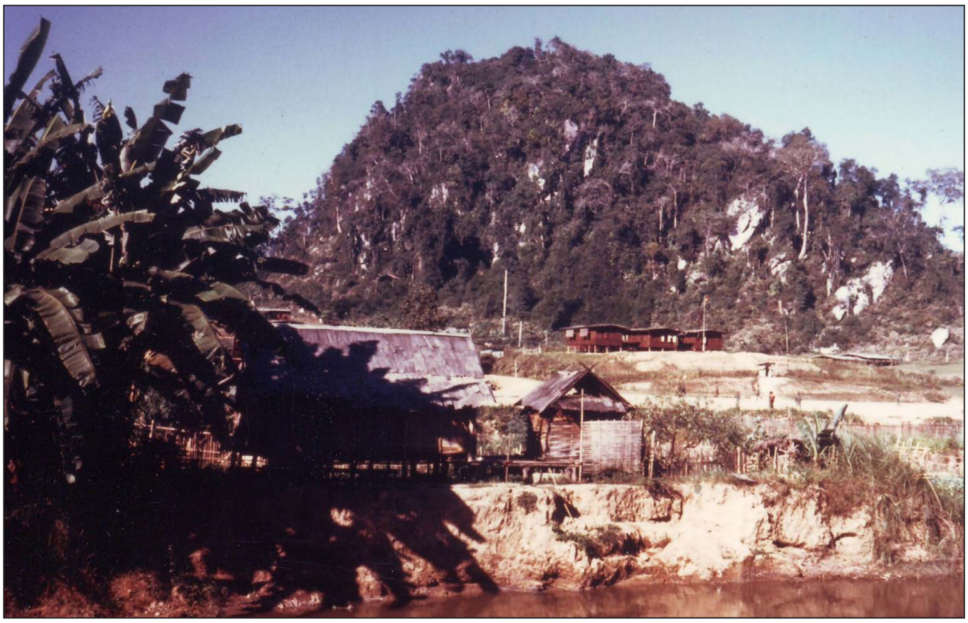
General Vang Pao fires a 4.2-inch mortar from Pa Doung during Operation Phou Phiang II, late 1972. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)



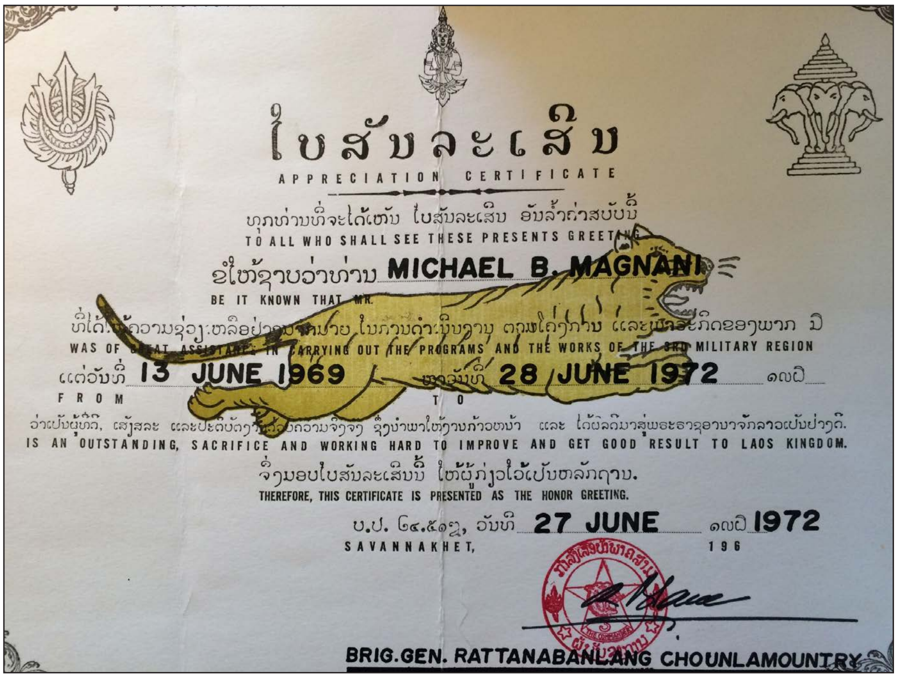
Sergeant Clyde Howard, a USAF combat controller, with Thai FAG Somchai "Small Man" Tankulsawat during Operation Phou Phiang II, September 1972. (Photo courtesy John Koren)



GM 42 personnel assemble prior to the onset of a mission, 1972. The wide latitude in choosing uniforms, headgear, and footwear is evident. (Photo courtesy Marti Peterson)



The jungle base at Nam Yu, late 1972. Nam Yu was the headquarters for guerrilla operations in northwestern MR 1, including intelligence forays into China's Yunnan Province. It was overrun by the Pathet Lao in February 1973. The communications shack used by CIA advisors is at the base of the karst; their living quarters is at the top of the hill. (Photo courtesy Gary Parrott)



ໃບສັນລະເສີນ

APPRECIATION CERTIFICATE

ທຸກທ່ານທີ່ຈະໄດ້ເຫັນ ໃບສັນລະເສີນ ອັນລ້ຳຄ່າສບັບນີ້

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS GREETING

ຂໍໃຫ້ຊາບວ່າທ່ານ **MICHAEL B. MAGNANI**

BE IT KNOWN THAT MR.

ທີ່ໄດ້ໃຫ້ຄວາມຊ່ວຍເຫລືອຢ່າງຫລາຍ ໃນການດຳເນີນງານ ຕາມໂຄງການ ແລະພາລະກິດຂອງພາກ ມີ

WAS OF GREAT ASSISTANCE IN CARRYING OUT THE PROGRAMS AND THE WORKS OF THE 3RD MILITARY REGION

ແຕ່ວັນທີ່ **13 JUNE 1969** ຫາວັນທີ່ **28 JUNE 1972** ໑໙໖

FROM TO

ວ່າເປັນຜູ້ທີ່ດີ, ເສັຽສລະ ແລະປະຕິບັດງານດ້ວຍຄວາມຈິງຈັງ ຊຶ່ງນຳພາໃຫ້ງານກ້າວໜ້າ ແລະ ໄດ້ຜົລດີມາສູ່ພຣະຣາຊອານາຈັກລາວເປັນຢ່າງດີ.

IS AN OUTSTANDING, SACRIFICE AND WORKING HARD TO IMPROVE AND GET GOOD RESULT TO LAOS KINGDOM.

ຈຶ່ງມອບໃບສັນລະເສີນນີ້ ໃຫ້ຜູ້ກ່ຽວໄວ້ເປັນຫລັກຖານ.

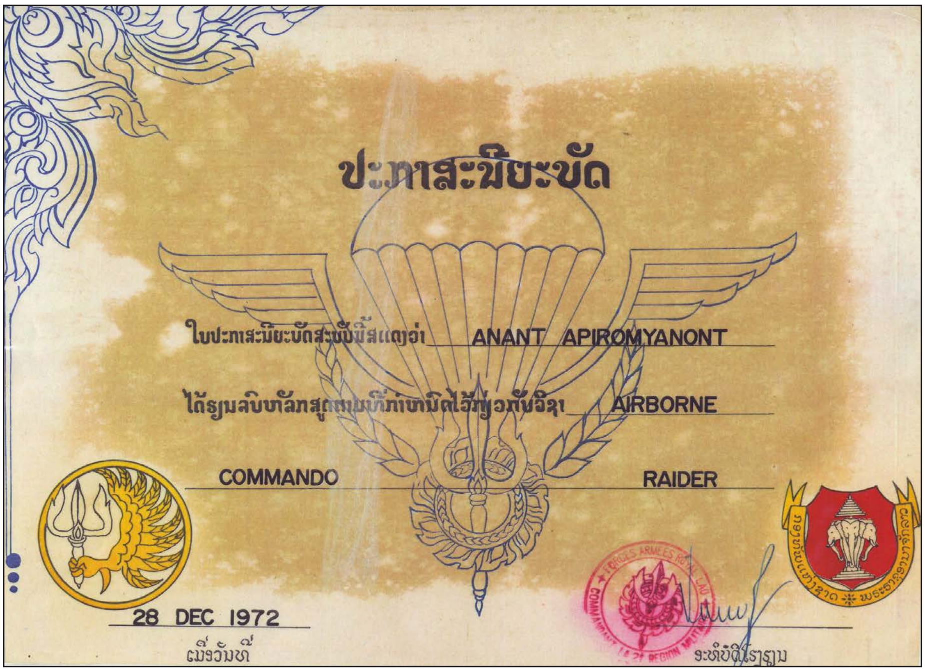
THEREFORE, THIS CERTIFICATE IS PRESENTED AS THE HONOR GREETING.

ບ.ປ. ໒໔.໕໑໗, ວັນທີ **27 JUNE** ໑໙໖ **1972**

SAVANNAKHET, 196

BRIG.GEN. RATTANABANLANG CHOUNLAMOUNTRY

Certificate of Appreciation given by the MR 3 guerrilla chief of staff, Brigadier General Rattanabanlang Chounlamountry, to CIA case officer Mike Magnani, June 1972. (Author's collection)



ປະກາສະນີຍະບັດ

ໃບປະກາສະນີຍະບັດສະບັບນີ້ສແດງວ່າ ANANT APIROMYANONT

ໄດ້ຮຽນຈົບຫລັກສູດທີ່ກຳໜົດໄວ້ກ່ຽວກັບວິຊາ AIRBORNE

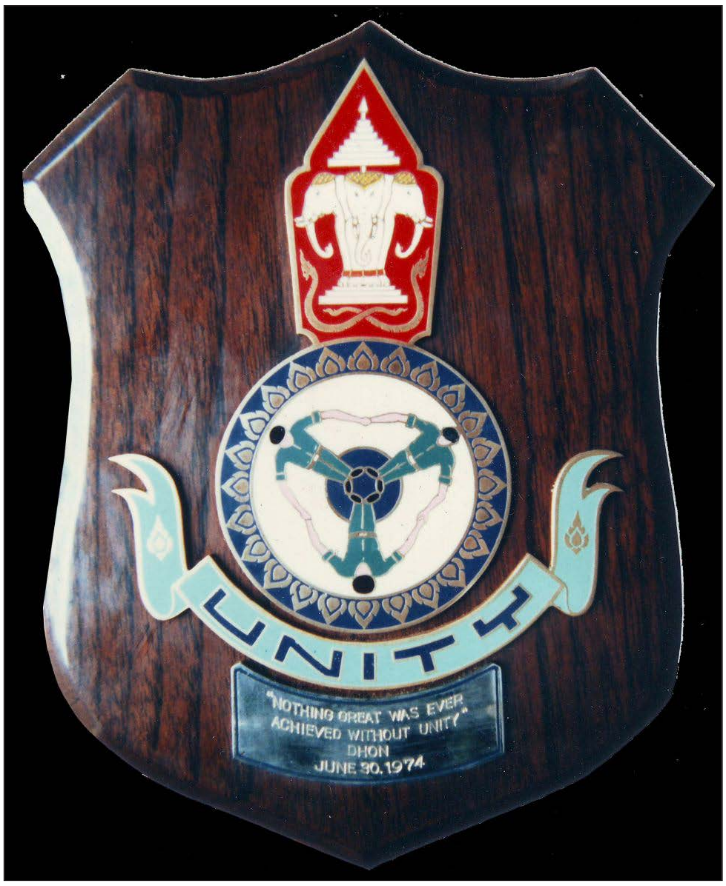
COMMANDO RAIDER

28 DEC 1972

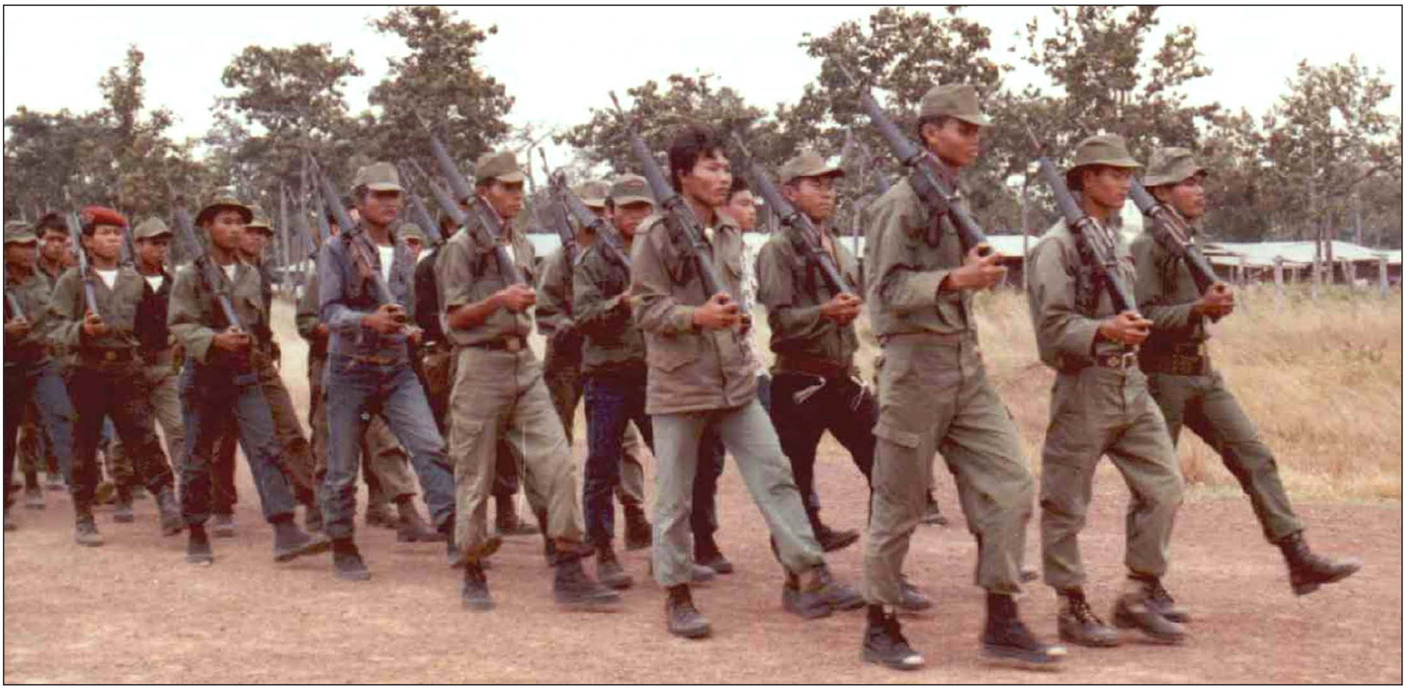
ເມື່ອວັນທີ

ອະທິບໍດີໂຮງຮຽນ

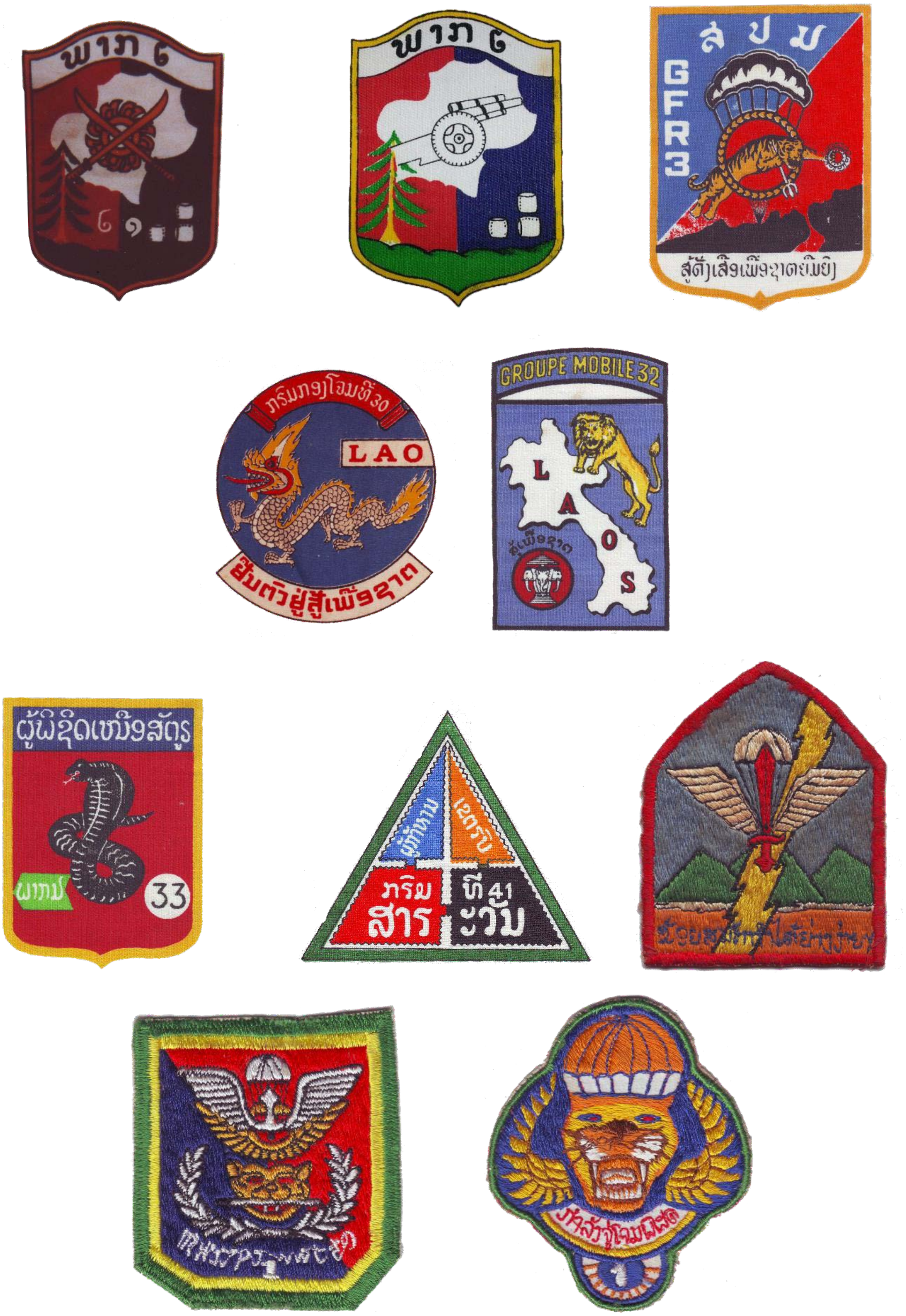
Certificate for the Commando Raider course run at Phitscamp, December 1972. It is signed by General Vang Pao, who often visited Phitscamp to witness the graduation of Hmong trainees. (Author's collection)


UNITY
"NOTHING GREAT WAS EVER
ACHIEVED WITHOUT UNITY"
DHON
JUNE 30,1974

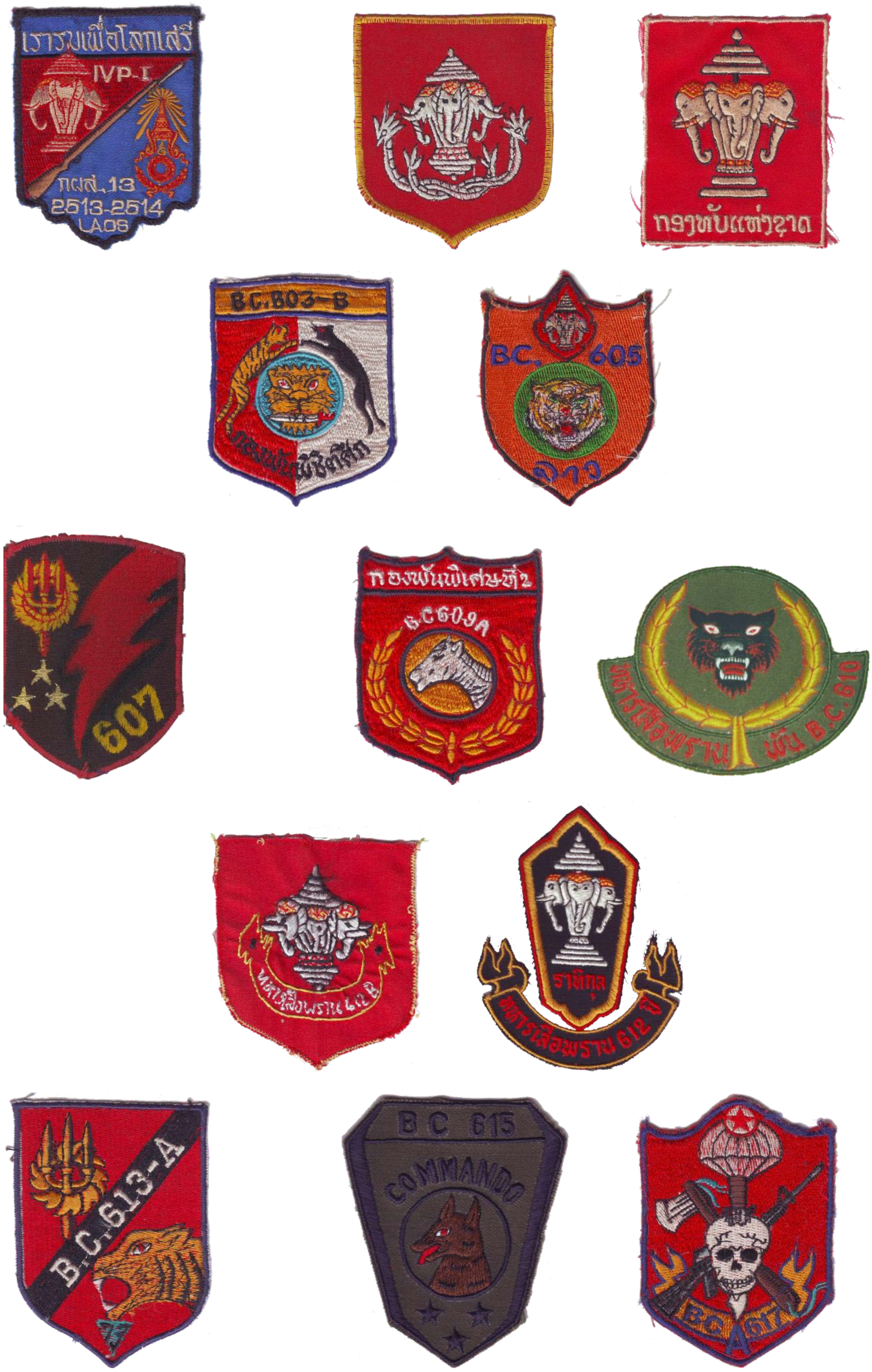
Plaque presented by the commander of Headquarters 333, General Dhon, to the deputy chief of the 4802nd JLD, Jim Glerum, at the conclusion of Project Unity on 30 June 1974. (Courtesy Jim Glerum)



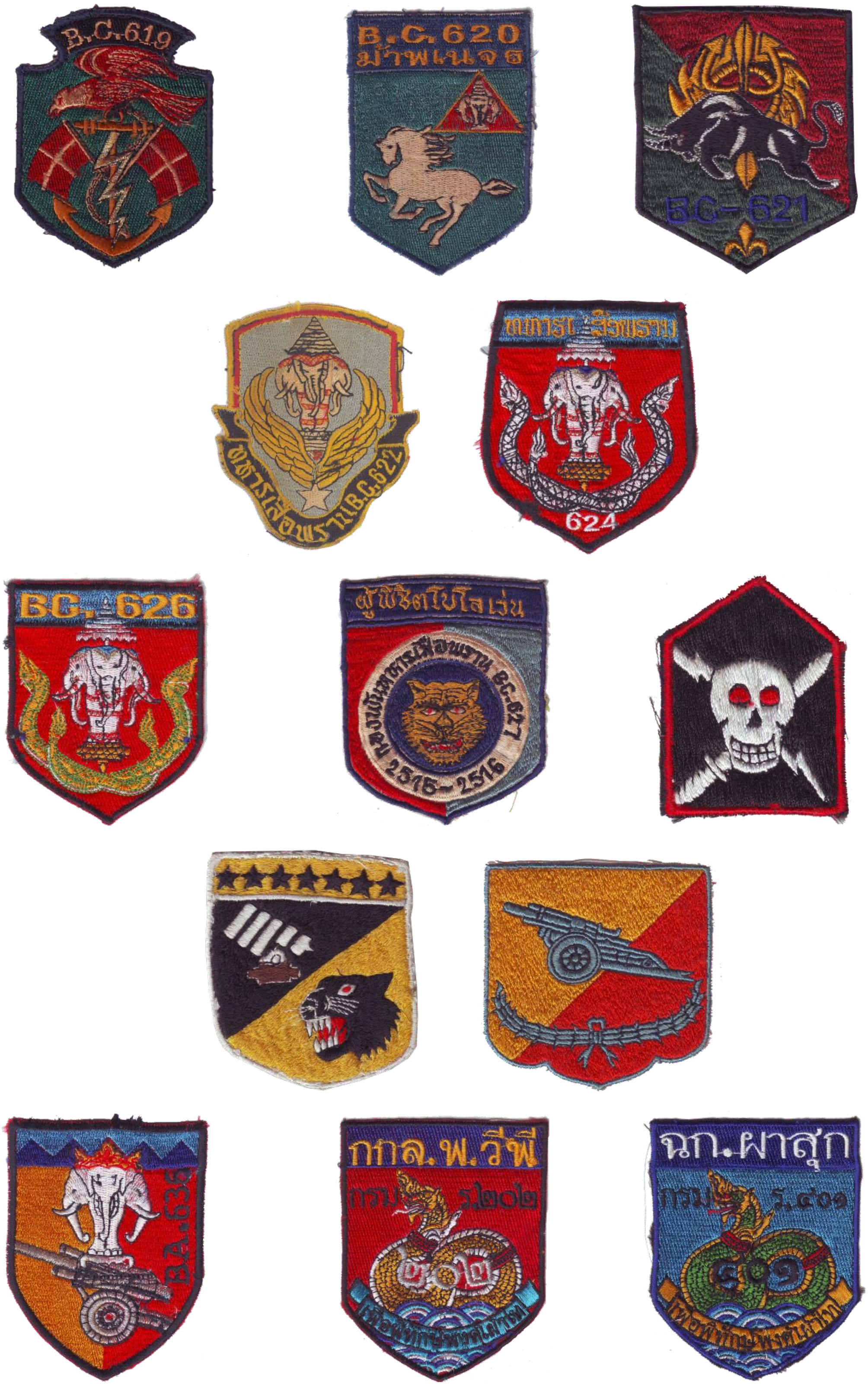
Some of the last Commando Raiders parade at Whiskey-3 camp. Except for a residual team retained at PS 44 for sensitive operations, most of the Commando Raiders from southern Laos had been reconfigured during 1972 into airborne pathfinder teams for the irregular GMs. (Photo courtesy John Conley)



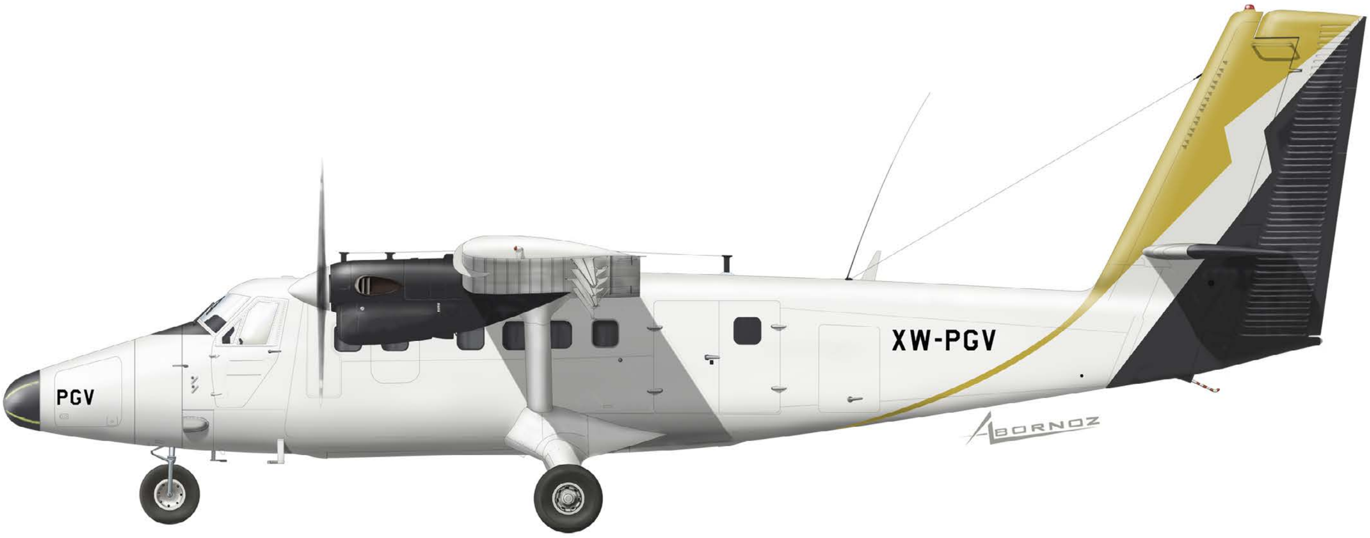
Top row, left: GM 21. The white map depicts the outline of MR 2; the conifer and three stone jars allude to the PDJ.
Top row, centre: MR 2 SGU artillery. In September 1969, 106 Hmong were taken to Thailand for two months of 155mm howitzer training.
Top row, right: Guerrilla Forces Region 3. This generic insignia for MR 3 SGUs was used from 1968 onward.
Second row, left: GM 30, early 1972. The bottom reads, "Fight for the Country."
Second row, right: GM 32.
Third row, left: GM 33. The top reads, "Always Overcome the Enemy."
Third row, centre: GM 41. The top reads, "Courageous, War Zone," and the bottom reads, "Saravane, GM 41."
Third row, right: MR 2 Commando Raiders.
Fourth row, left: MR 3 Commando Raiders.
Fourth row, right: MR 3 Commando Raiders. The bottom reads, "Special Attack Strike Force."



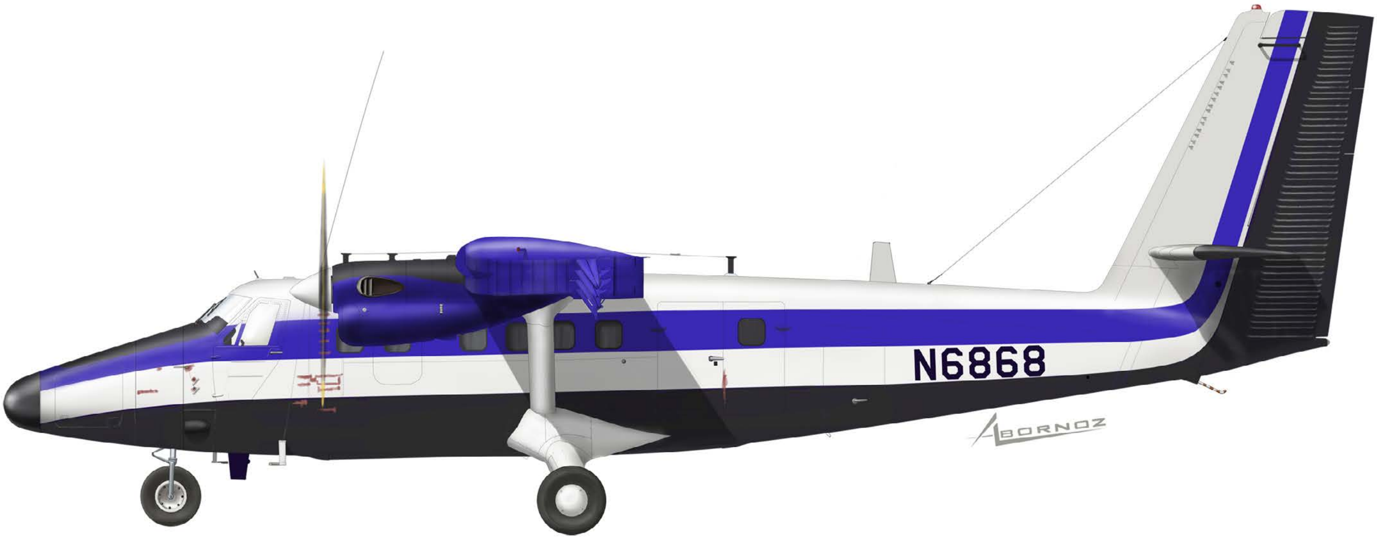
Top row, left: Infantry elements from Regiment 13 used in Task Force Vang Pao, 1970-71.
Top row, centre: Generic insignia used for Project Unity.
Top row, right: Unity's Task Force Vang Pao in MR 2.
Second row, left: BC 603B. When Unity battalions were sent back to Thailand for retraining, they returned with an "A" suffix after their numerical designation. If they returned for retraining a second time, they were given a "B" suffix.
Second row, right: BC 605.
Third row, left: BC 607.
Third row, centre: BC 609A.
Third row, right: BC 610, used when the battalion was deployed to the PDJ in late 1971.
Fourth row, left: BC 612B.
Fourth row, right: BC 612B (variant).
Fifth row, left: BC 613A.
Fifth row, centre: BC 615, the only Unity patch in subdued colours.
Fifth row, right: BC 617A. No Unity battalions were airborne qualified, though several had cadre drawn from the RTSF.



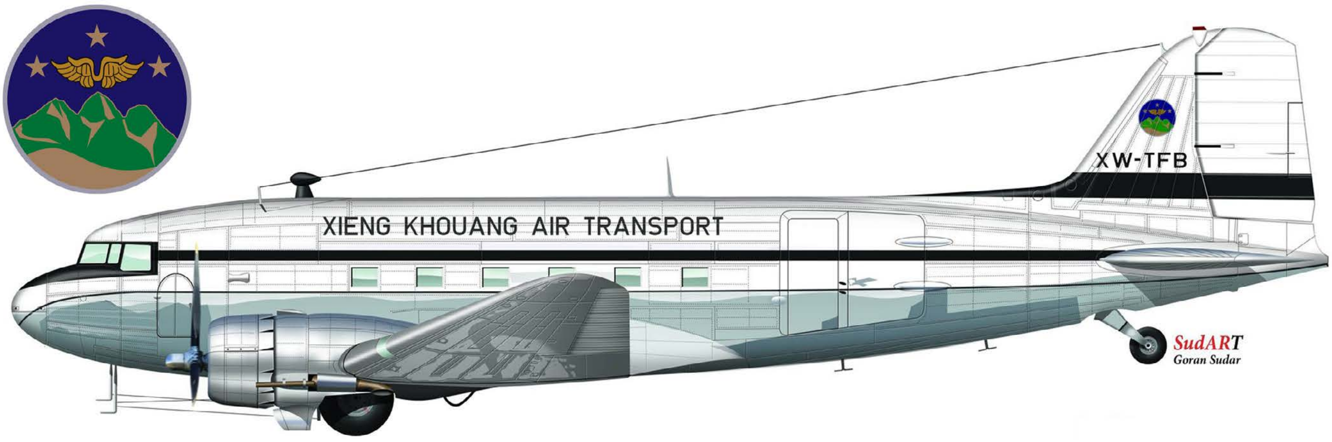
Top row, left: BC 619. This was the only Unity battalion to have its cadre provided by the Royal Thai Marine Corps.
Top row, centre: BC 620. This was the only Unity battalion to have its cadre provided by the RTA cavalry.
Top row, right: BC 621.
Second row, left: BC 622. This was the first of two Unity battalion to have its cadre provided by Royal Thai Air Force airbase security units.
Second row, right: BC 624.
Third row, left: BC 626.
Third row, centre: BC 627. This was the last Unity infantry battalion to be formed.
Third row, right: Hunter-Killer Team under Task Force Rathikoun at Xieng Lom.
Fourth row, left: BA 634, the first Unity artillery battalion.
Fourth row, right: BC 635.
Fifth row, left: BA 636.
Fifth row, centre: GM 202, a Unity regimental grouping in MR 2.
Fifth row, right: GM 401, a Unity regimental grouping in MR 4.



Continental Air Services DHC-6 Twin Otter
In September 1970, CASI acquired its first DHC-6 Twin Otter, XW-PGV, from charter service Saber Air in Singapore. It still bears the Saber Air colour scheme on the tail and fuselage. CASI would take on three more Twin Otters between April and September 1971. (Artwork by Pablo Albornoz)



Air America DHC-6 Twin Otter
Following the CASI lead, beginning in February 1971 Air America purchased the first of four DHC-6 Twin Otters. These were used for normal transport duties by day, then for Special Projects – such as dropping Commando Raiders – by night. Because of their heavy involvement in nocturnal operations, most were eventually repainted in a night colour scheme of dark blue and black. This airframe, N6868, was registered with Air America in September 1972 and still bears its original blue/white/black colour scheme. It was used as an airborne command post during a top-secret wiretap operation in Vinh, North Vietnam, on 6/7 December 1972. (Artwork by Pablo Albornoz)



Xieng Khouang Air Transport C-47
In 1967, the CIA created Xieng Khouang Air Transport to provide Vang Pao with his own mini-airline. Flying mainly between Vientiane and Long Tieng, it initially consisted of two C-47s leased from CASI with Thai crews. These featured a single golden-orange horizontal stripe down the fuselage and golden-orange lettering. One crashed in January 1970 and was replaced by XW-TFB from Air America stocks, which featured a black stripe on the fuselage and another on the tail fin. This airframe was sold to a Singapore-owned charter company in the Khmer Republic in February 1973. The airline logo on the tail, which was also used on flight-suit insignia, featured the mountainous terrain of MR 2. (Artwork by Goran Sudar)

GM 31 loads aboard CH-53s from the USAF 21st Special Operations Squadron during Operation Sayasila, 28 July 1971. (Author's collection)

loan of GM 32, which had just finished retraining after its successful deployment to Luang Prabang.

On 10 September, 1,070 troops from GM 32 loaded into Air America transports and flew to the Wat Phu training centre. Commando Raiders departed early the next morning, securing a landing zone in the elephant grass six kilometres east of Paksong. GM 32, following in their wake, quickly bullied their way atop the Phou Thevadas, a pair of rocky outcroppings bracketing Route 232 four kilometres east of Paksong. With the Phou Thevada high ground secured, Soutchay reassembled the FAR and Neutralist contributions and had them choppered on 12 September to a landing zone seven kilometres southeast of Paksong. This force then headed north to reinforce the gains made by GM 32.

To the west, FSB Lightning moved forward to Ban Gnik. On 11 September, its two 105mm and three 155mm howitzers fired 500 rounds eastward, pinning down PAVN along Route 23 as GM 32 began its infiltration. By 14 September, GM 32, advancing behind a wall of tactical air sorties, reached the eastern outskirts of Paksong. Soutchay, meanwhile, was trying — mostly in vain — to have the FAR column exploit these gains.

By the following morning, the bulk of the PAVN 9th Regiment, facing threats from the south, east and west, withdrew northeast along Route 23. At noon, as GM 32 was still rooting out the remaining Vietnamese from inside Paksong, an impromptu ceremony was held in the town. With case officer Jim "Sword" Lewis taking photos, Acting Defence Minister Sisouk Na Champassak pinned general's stars on Soutchay's shoulders. Also getting stars was Thao Ly, the MR 3 SGU chief of staff whose irregulars had been so instrumental in Sayasila. With Soutchay's promotion, GM 41's commander, Colonel Vanthong Phommarath, was named the new MR 4 SGU chief of staff. Taking over GM 41 was the BG 403 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ting Davong.

Once the Sayasila campaign was officially concluded at the end of October, Pakse Unit concocted a rainy season finale to make use of its revamped paramilitary forces. Because PS 18 was no longer used by the Cambodians of Project Copper, the base reverted back to its former status as the primary MR 4 SGU training camp. By that time, the decision was made to convert all the region's paramilitary battalions — GB as well as SGU — into *bataillons guerriers*. As PS 18 turned out BGs, then, four of them (BGs 402, 403, 407, and 408) were organised into Pakse's first irregular regiment, GM

MR 3 Chief of Support Brad "Bee" Handley (left) and Chief of Operations Wil Greene listen to chief of staff for MR 3 guerrilla forces Thao Ly, late 1971. Greene arrived in Laos in December 1966 and was initially posted to PS 22 on the Bolovens. He remained in MR 4 until mid-1969, then was promoted to Chief of Operations for MR 2. In early 1971 he shifted to MR 3 Chief of Operations until his death due to complications from a gallbladder operation in April 1972. Handley was MR 3 Chief of Support from 1971 through June 1972, then served as MR 2 Chief of Support through 1973. (Photo courtesy Brad Handley)

41. Chosen as commander was Lieutenant Colonel Vanthong Phommarath, a highly respected officer with excellent English skills; Leon “Khamsing” Williamson, previously case officer for the MR 4 Commando Raiders, became the regiment’s CIA advisor.

On 1 November, GM 41 was lifted to Saravane for Pakse Unit’s first regimental action, Operation Bedrock. The campaign was designed to sweep the rice-rich paddyland southwest of Saravane. Within one day, GM 41 had pushed 21 kilometres. PAVN forces avoided contact, making for a successful, if not quiet, first mission. On 9 November, the operation was brought to a close as the regiment regrouped at Saravane.

No sooner was Bedrock concluded than Pakse Unit was drafting plans for Operation Thao La, an early dry season strike against the PAVN supply route and storage area near Vietnamese-held Thateng. If Thao La could slice this corridor, it would cut supplies feeding Vietnamese units on the Bolovens, as well as those destined for battlefields further south.

With PAVN resistance predicted to be heavy, Thao La was divided into two phases. First, GM 41 would converge on Thateng from three directions. Second, a Savannakhet GM would take the area immediately to the east, then sweep west and link up with the MR 4 irregulars at Thateng. Savannakhet’s planned contribution for Thao La was GM 33, the veteran of Desert Rat and Phoutah. Colonel Vanthong, its original commander, had since quit; filling in as temporary head was Lieutenant Colonel Bounthavy Phouysangiem.

On 19 November, 1,150 troops of GM 33 boarded Air America C-123s at Nong Saphong and were flown to Saravane. Two mornings later, eight CH-53 and two CH-3 Knives lifted the regiment into a Commando Raider-held landing zone north of Ban Phone. On the same day, three battalions from GM 41 began working their way through the paddies south of Saravane. With considerable heavy-weapons support, on the afternoon of 26 November the MR 4 irregulars were able to capture Thateng.

By the end of the week, Thao La appeared to have reached an anti-climax. Although GM 41 troops unearthed some supply caches — two tons of sugar, one ton of coffee, 20 tubs of lard — it was an embarrassing haul compared with the likes of Kou Kiet. Perhaps lulled into a sense of complacency, on the night of 9 December the regiment was surprised by PAVN armour. One of the tanks penetrated into Thateng, rotating on one tread and firing in a circle. Two irregular battalions fled, but the remainder of GM 41 managed to hold until 13 December, when Bounthavy’s men arrived at the town. Together, the two regiments manned the Thateng perimeter against increasing North Vietnamese pressure.

As Thao La came under hard times, an estimated three PAVN battalions with heavy weapons and tanks targeted Saravane. After the resident FAR garrison fled, GM 33 on 17 December was directed to move against the town from the south. Despite tactical airstrikes, however, PAVN armour and infantry kept GM 33 at bay. By that late hour, Soutchay realised that even if Saravane were to be taken, PAVN would likely recapture the town soon afterward. Accordingly, GM 33 on 23 December was directed to return to Nong Saphong. Less fortunate was GM 41, which, hard hit at Thateng while covering the movement of GM 33, was withdrawn to PS 18 in tatters. Thus, with the eastern Bolovens in Vietnamese hands and PAVN bringing in reinforcements at will, the RLG had little to show for its rainy season pains.

The Chinese Road

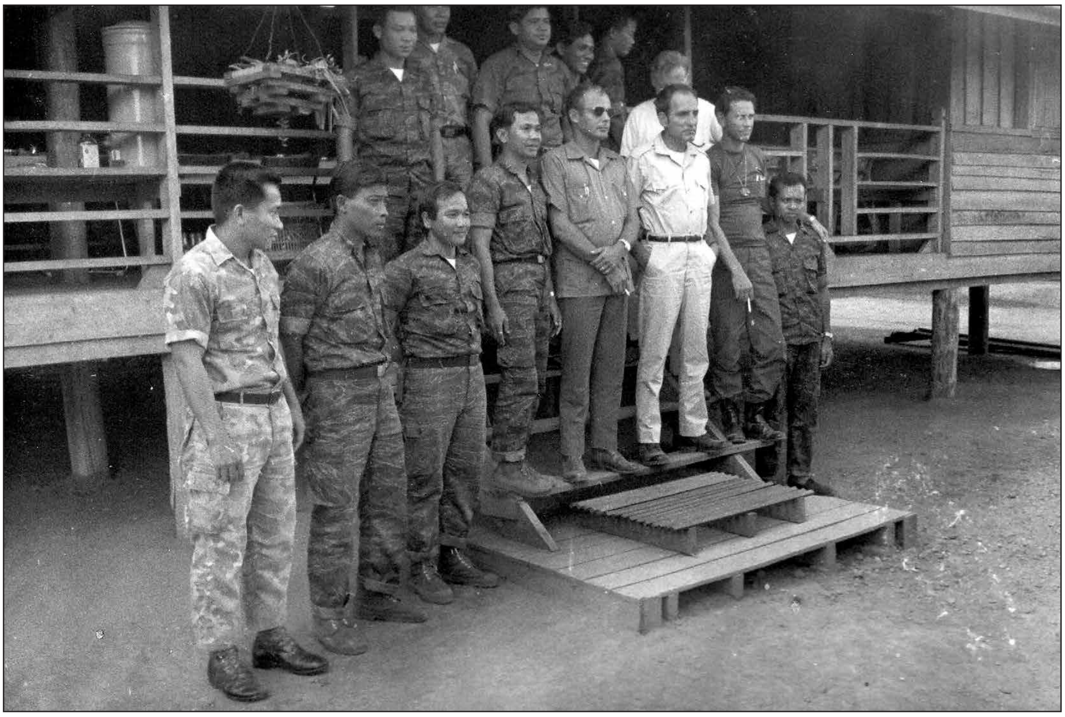
Long the junior party within the CIA’s triad of MR 1 paramilitary programs, FG/W, headquartered at Xieng Lom and encompassing Sayaboury Province, had initially been subordinated under Tony Poe at Nam Yu. Only in 1967 did FG/W begin to inch its way out of obscurity when Thailand dispatched a 15-man RTA detachment to establish an SGU training centre one kilometre south of Xieng Lom. The CIA assigned a single officer to the centre, who still reported to Poe at Nam Yu.

As FG/W got into the paramilitary training business, two things distinguished the Xieng Lom guerrilla program. First was the lead role taken by the RTA — not unusual considering Bangkok’s sensitivity about its contiguous border in this vicinity. Second, the ethnic composition of Xieng Lom’s initial guerrilla units favoured the thin local Hmong population; Vang Pao’s liaison officer at Nam Yu, Major Moua Sue, had relocated to the Thai-run training camp to head recruitment efforts.

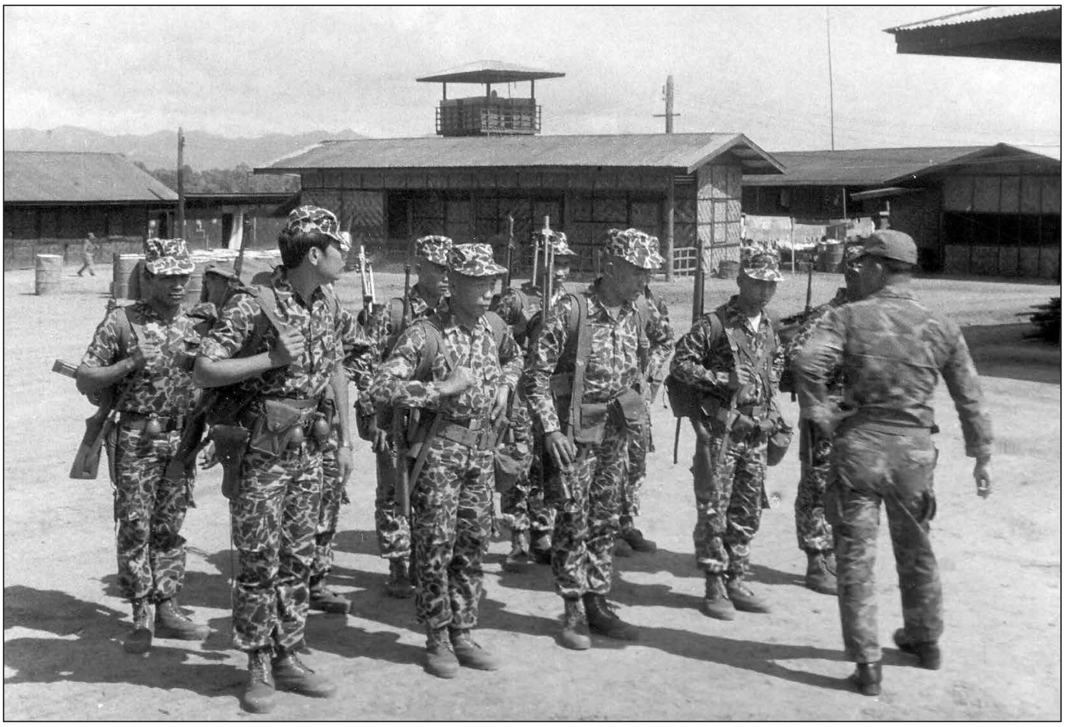
By early 1969, FG/W was rethinking its reliance on the Hmong. Of specific concern was the issue of phantom troops — non-existent soldiers used for padding payrolls — under Moua Sue’s command. A standoff with the resident CIA officer ensured; in protest, the officer permanently relocated to Nam Yu.

During this time, China had dispatched a sizable military construction contingent to begin building a network of roads in

Hmong SGU climb aboard a destroyed PAVN Type 63 armoured personnel carrier after moving onto the PDJ, mid-1971. (Photo courtesy Mike Ingham)



Vientiane Station Chief Hugh Tovar (front row, third from right) poses with an RTA intelligence team at Xieng Lom, 1971. Paramilitary training officer Al Friend is second from right. Wil "Squeak" Charette, fourth from right, took over from Tony Poe in 1970 as the ranking CIA officer in northwest Laos. (Photo courtesy Don Stephens)



A special intelligence team in "duck hunter" camouflage assembles at Xieng Lom, 1971. (Photo courtesy Don Stephens)

northwestern Laos in the direction of the Mekong valley. This, naturally, set Bangkok on edge. Sharing Thailand's concern, the CIA in mid-1969 dispatched four officers to Xieng Lom and ordered a thorough review of FG/W assets. Their conclusion: they needed to start from scratch after a thorough housecleaning. In addition, they advocated that recruitment shift from the Hmong to the more plentiful Lao Theung tribesmen. When the Hmong staged an armed insurrection over that last suggestion, Udorn responded by immediately cutting off all funding to the site. The remaining 300 Hmong guerrillas were subsequently shipped off to MR 2.

While Xieng Lom was having growing pains, FG/NW at Nam Yu was blossoming. Under Tony Poe was a large and growing ensemble of case officers, several of whom were assigned to specific ethnic groups: George Kenning, for example, was responsible for liaison with the Mien; West Pointer Joe Boys worked with the Lao Theung; a third advisor handled the Lu and some smaller ethnic groups.

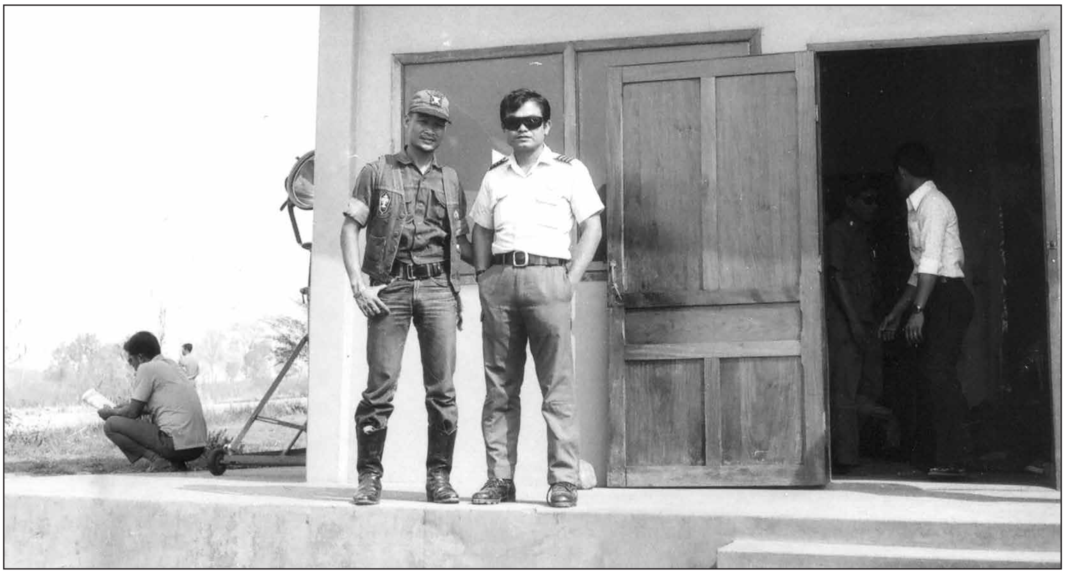
In the fall of 1970, Poe, the Nam Yu chief for more than five years, had a falling out with Vientiane Station following a series of media exposés. To get him out of the limelight, Poe was reassigned to Thailand. Replacing him was Wil "Squeak" Charette, a parachuting expert (he had been on the U.S. Army's Golden Knights freefall team) and former advisor in MR 4. With the arrival of Charette, Nam Yu (and Xieng Lom) both reverted to being administered under Luang Prabang Unit.

Following Charette's arrival, there was a major push to expand and reorganise a new generation of SGU battalions. As before, the battalions would be divided along ethnic lines. By mid-1971, FG/NW boasted nine battalions numbered in the 100 series. For example, BG 101 was composed of segregated Lu and Lao Theung companies, while BG 102 wan an all-Mien formation.

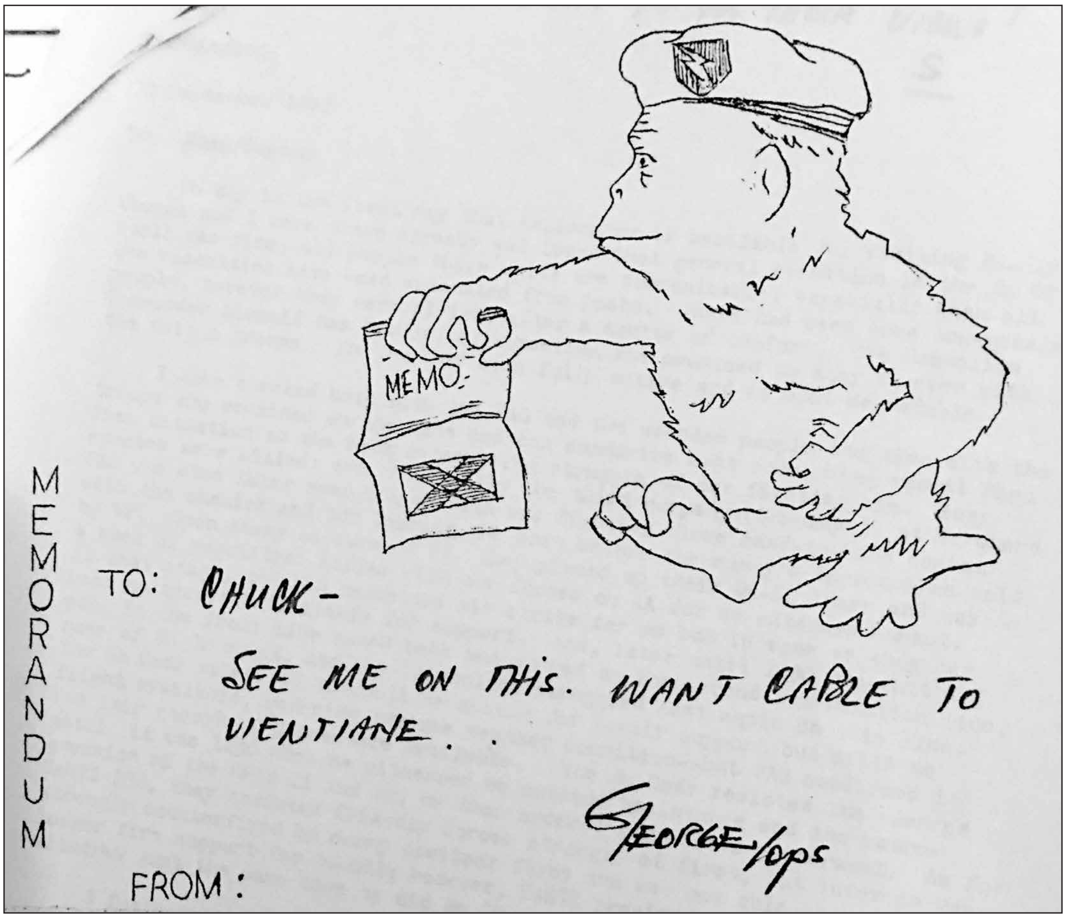
Down in FG/W, meantime, the spring of 1971 saw increased communist pressure. This came at a bad time for the zone, as its pair of resident FAR battalions were both reinforcing besieged Luang Prabang. Thus depleted, the remaining ADC forces were unable to hold up against a Pathet Lao push 35 kilometres northwest of Xieng Lom.

For Thailand, such reverses along its frontier were unacceptable. With one eye on the Chinese Road nearing the Mekong and another on the increasing amount of Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) supplies reaching its border, Bangkok was eager to extend its forward defences inside FG/W. Specifically, Headquarters 333 was calling for a Unity task force to be established at Xieng Lom.

With Vientiane Station lending its support, an order went out in late spring that breathed new life into Xieng Lom. Selected to head



Air America Captain Bounleu (right) at Xieng Lom with an officer from the elite Hunter-Killer Team of Task Force Rathikoun. (Photo courtesy Veera Star)



MEMORANDUM

TO: CHUCK -

SEE ME ON THIS. WANT CABLE TO VIENTIANE. .

FROM: GEORGE/ops

Memorandum coversheet used by George Morton in 1971. A legend in the US Army Special Forces community, Morton in 1968 was named Chief of Operations for the 4802nd JLD as the paramilitary campaign in Laos experienced exponential growth. (via James Morrison)

the base was Burr Smith, coming off several years working alongside Vang Pao in MR 2. Concurrently, three Unity battalions began arriving on 15 June from Kanchanaburi. The trio were named Task Force Rathikoun in honour of the FAR general with long-standing (mostly illicit) ties to northwestern Laos.

Reflecting the importance the Thai assigned to Xieng Lom, they chose Major (later Lieutenant Colonel) Pichit Kullavanijaya to head Task Force Rathikoun. As one of the first Thai graduates from West Point, Pichit was an experienced paratrooper, a veteran of the Queen's Cobras (Thailand's regiment-size contribution to the war in South Vietnam), and widely considered among the best combat officers in the RTA. Others in his staff, like Captain Wimol Wongwanich, were highly rated RTSF officers.

For Bangkok, such professionalism in the Rathikoun cadre was warranted given China's ongoing road-building activity in northwestern Laos. During December 1971, an Air Laos C-47 was shot down over the road network by Chinese gunners. And on 27 December, an Air America C-123K transport was downed near the Mekong town of Pakbeng. Searching for wreckage, Air America planes were hit by groundfire that afternoon and the following day. During the third week of January 1972, an Air America Volpar, dropping leaflets offering a reward for information on the missing C-123K crew, took an 85mm round that cost pilot Jim Rhyne his leg.

For reasons of realpolitik, Washington refrained from retaliation. By contrast, Pichit looked to serve his own warning to China by dispatching elements of BC 615 and two 75mm pack howitzers to a pair of newly established mountaintop outposts opposite Pakbeng. Almost as soon as these Unity troops were in place, communist forces laid siege to the two positions for six nights and seven days.

With casualties mounting, Air America flew a two-ship medevac mission to the Unity sites on 19 March 1972. Damaged by small-arms fire, one of the H-34s was forced to ditch in the jungle 12 kilometres short of Xieng Lom. Air America personnel were furious, first because they had lost an aircraft and second because they felt the Xieng Lom chief, Burr Smith, had misled the H-34 pilots by downplaying the threat around the Thai positions.

In all this, Pichit saw an opportunity. On the one hand, Air America wanted to salvage its damaged chopper, and on the other, Smith had been resisting Thai requests to reinforce the two forward positions. By nightfall, a deal was struck: Task Force Rathikoun would secure the crash site — in return for increased CIA logistical support of the two Unity outposts. Late the following morning, BC

611 poured from choppers around the downed H-34 and ultimately let Air America recover its helicopter. Pichit, then, was able to redirect the battalion northeast and reinforce both of his riverside positions.

Further action continued through mid-year, culminating with a June operation 45 kilometres northwest of Xieng Lom. In coordination with the RTA on the Thai side of the border, two Rathikoun battalions maneuvered for a pincer. Unfortunately, the RTA faltered on their side, leaving an 80-man Unity contingent cut off and surrounded.

Looking to effect a breakout for the trapped men, Pichit turned to his Hunter-Killer Team, a 70-man mixed PARU-RTSF unit. Infiltrating from the Mekong, the team secured a landing zone, into which was flown a 75mm pack howitzer and 4.2-inch mortar. With this makeshift firebase firing in support, an Air America chopper on 12 June tried to medevac the wounded from the trapped column. Communist small-arms fire, however, zeroed in on the H-34; one round entered through the windshield and fatally struck the pilot in the head. Following that loss, further medevac attempts were cancelled.

For 10 more days, the trapped Unity troops kept the communists at bay. At that point the Hunter-Killers manage to link up with their colleagues, leading them back to the artillery position. Just as quickly, communist forces surrounded the jungle firebase. Air America and the USAF, mindful of the earlier groundfire, balked at requests to lift out the troops and two heavy weapons. Not willing to forfeit his men or equipment, Pichit donned a parachute and, together with one PARU and one RTSF commando, jumped from a Pilatus Porter into the base.

Dramatically demonstrating the absence of antiaircraft fire, Pichit called in White Horse choppers to hose down the perimeter. Moments later, 21st Special Operations Squadron Knives swept in to lift out his troops and guns.

7

HOUSE OF CARDS

All signs – intercepted communications, road-watch reports – pointed toward the 1971-72 communist dry season offensive being the biggest to date. Against this, RLG forces on the PDJ were lagging in their preparedness. First, few precautions had been taken against armoured attack. Second, Vang Pao was being provided with little by way of a reserve force on the plain. This was largely because MRs 3 and 4 were focused on the Bolovens campaign. Only MR 1 had come forward with a contribution of two battalions: one from FG/NW placed on the southeastern PDJ, plus an additional battalion of raw Mien recruits from Nam Yu.

Third, morale was low among the Hmong troops. This was due in part to plummeting temperatures at night, payroll problems (some claimed no pay since September), and the gloom associated with being forced to spend the upcoming holidays on the battlefront. The 1971 Hmong New Year was officially set for 16–21 December; however, Long Tieng's sprawling refugee population, looking for any excuse to divert attention from the war, had already begun festivities in late November. By mid-December, many Hmong officers had left their forward units and gravitated toward the Long Tieng parties, leaving their men leaderless and dispirited in the trenches.

With the PDJ a virtual house of cards, then, Hanoi handed its 1971–72 dry season campaign to one of PAVN's most brilliant tacticians, Major General Le Trong Tan. The officer behind PAVN's first corps-size operation – the Lam Son 719 counterattack in early 1971 – Tan in early December was tapped to coordinate the multi-division operation to retake the PDJ, codenamed Campaign Z. Tan would be provided with an unprecedented amount of firepower, to include T-34 tanks, Chinese-made K-63 armoured personnel carriers, and 130mm field guns; the VPAF had even been told to secretly prepare half a dozen MiG-21 jets for a possible surprise attack on Long Tieng.

On the night of 17 December, Campaign Z began during an unseasonal spell of heavy rain. Moving through the Ban Ban valley and past the Nong Pet junction under thick overcast, General Tan sent forth tanks and infantry from the 316th Division's 174th Regiment toward the loose frontline formed by GMs 21 and 23. Simultaneously, the 312th Division followed Route 72 through Xieng Khouangville and toward GM 22 positions around the southeastern PDJ.

As the Vietnamese approached, the Hmong regiments, many of them with commanders in Long Tieng, dropped their weapons and began filtering back past the Unity firebases even before serious clashes occurred. By daybreak, no amount of cajoling by Vang Pao or the CIA case officers could stop the exodus.

The Hmong screen having instantly evaporated, PAVN was free to move against the Unity firebases. First to feel the heat was FSB Lion on the west end of Phou Theung. Using a mix of 122mm rockets and 85mm field guns fired from northeast of the plain, the North Vietnamese at 0400 hours began bombarding Phou Theung. By 1000 hours, they had managed to haul several antiaircraft guns to the base of the mountain; concurrently, they seized the rise just east of Phou Theung and established mortar and recoilless rifle positions.

Its heavy-weapons barrage increasing by noon, PAVN scored several direct hits on FSB Lion, igniting a store of 155mm charges and collapsing several bunkers. In the resultant confusion, FSB Lion ended up all but crippled. Panicking, the Hmong howitzer crew on the high ground 200 meters to the east spiked its gun, lit its ammunition dump and ran west.

While Phou Theung was under attack, a smaller PAVN column hit FSB Mustang on Finger Ridge. Under fire, the Mustang gunners were harassed throughout the day and unable to come to the defence of their colleagues on Phou Theung.

With PAVN rounds falling through the night, 19 December opened with a bang, literally. That morning, a Vietnamese shell landed square on a Phou Theung mortar storage bunker. Commented Unity case officer Hardnose, watching from atop Phou Seu: "It looked like a mini-nuclear bomb had gone off."

Responding to the unfolding emergency, a CASI Twin Otter dropped ordnance to BC 609 on Phou Theung. Despite the resupply, PAVN through the early afternoon methodically overran outlying BC 609 positions. By 1700 hours, with the Vietnamese on the verge of taking the battalion headquarters, the battalion's FAG, call-

WELCOME
TO
KINGKONG'S HOME

Sign hung outside FSB King Kong following its capture by PAVN, December 1971. (Photo courtesy Albert Grandolini)

signed Whiskey 02, made an emotional radio appeal for FSB King Kong to fire airbursts over his own position. Though King Kong fulfilled the order, it failed to prevent the PAVN attackers from pressing forward and killing Whiskey 02 and three BC 609 officers. Ultimately, only one officer and 28 men from the battalion managed to escape west to FSB Lion.

As BC 609 abandoned the top of Phou Theung, PAVN filled the void and began firing down on Lion. Vietnamese also moved a recoilless rifle into the empty Hmong howitzer post and, firing west, ignited Lion's store of 105mm charges, crippled its fire direction centre and disabled two 105mm howitzers. By 2000 hours, with all its guns destroyed by communist fire, the Lion gunners, joined by other Unity stragglers, headed west toward FSB Stingray.

Elsewhere, FSB Mustang came under pressure as PAVN for the first time employed T-34 armour in northern Laos. With a tank rolling atop one of its bunkers, the Thai troops fled west toward FSB Stingray. En route, an ambush killed the BC 603 commander and wounded its operations officer.

As the core of Unity's defensive grid collapsed, PAVN forces shifted their attention toward the remaining outposts around the PDJ. On 19 December, FSB Panther at Ban Thang was hit hard by 130mm fire. On the same day, Dac Cong commandos and infantry began harassing FSB Stingray from the rear. And, though yet to be attacked, the Hmong at Moung Soui abandoned their howitzers and headed south toward Ban Na.

Against these reverses, virtually the only positive news was coming from FSB King Kong at Phou Keng. Fortunately for the King Kong defenders, the same rains that had given the Vietnamese the advantage of cloud cover had also turned the lowlands south and southeast of Phou Keng into swamps. Its T-34s becoming mired, PAVN was forced to divert the armour west to Moung Phanh, then along hard ground toward the southeastern face of Phou Keng. In a coordinated move, PAVN infantry, supported by 122mm rockets and 130mm artillery fire, manoeuvred from the northeast against the Phou Keng summit. Though confronted with a pincer, King Kong bested PAVN through the night.

As the battle for the PDJ finished its second day, the fate of the struggle was sealed in the skies over MR 2. That day, the USAF lost three F-4 fighters: one downed in Sam Neua; a second shot down by a VPAF MiG-21 east of the plain; and a third, also east of the PDJ, running out of gas, forcing its crew to eject. The net result of all this was that the USAF, which already was flying minimal close air support because of foul weather, was all but absent from the PDJ over the next critical 24 hours.

On the morning of 20 December, FSB Panther, which was being subjected to intermittent heavy-weapons barrages, was declared a medevac area for withdrawing Unity forces. By late afternoon, however, Vietnamese artillery and armour forced Panther to flee toward Ban Na.

With the collapse of Panther, all that remained on the PDJ was the King Kong enclave around Phou Keng. Virtually surrounded, they held off for a day before waiting until nightfall to attempt an exfiltration to the west.

The PDJ all but gone, at 1600 hours on 20 December FSB Cobra abandoned its position and headed toward a predetermined rally point on Phou Long Mat. A similar situation unfolded at FSB Stingray and BC 610 on Phou Seu. At 1600 hours, the Stingray gun crews set charges on their howitzers and, together with stragglers from Mustang, also headed toward Phou Long Mat. Thus, in little more than three days of heavy fighting, Major General Tan had retaken the PDJ and made a mockery of the RLG's interlocking firebase strategy.

As the PDJ was falling, the Unity trainers at Kanchanaburi had readied three new battalions and rushed them to Long Tieng. The battalions were originally scheduled to reinforce positions on the plain itself, but by then it was too late. Instead, they were sent to the hills between the plain and Long Tieng to help collect stragglers fleeing off the PDJ.

Against this meagre reinforcement of three Thai battalions, General Tan opened the next phase of Campaign Z. From Phou Keng, he redirected a column toward Ban Na, which they took in three days. Worse, PAVN sappers – in a repeat of the previous February – infiltrated that night into Long Tieng from the direction of the king's villa. Stealing onto the aircraft parking ramp, they destroyed two light planes. Another group of commandos reached Vang Pao's residence, putting a B-40 round into its side.

With just cause for pessimism, Station Chief Tovar, joined by Pat Landry from Udorn, flew north to encourage Vang Pao. When they found him, the Hmong general was hidden in a hut near Phou Long Mat with a bad flu.

Fortunately for Vang Pao, the cavalry was on its way – in a variety of forms. On 22 December, Savannakhet Unit finally broke free one of its regiments, GM 31, and rushed it to Long Tieng. Upon arrival, GM 31 was immediately deployed along a line stretching from the

Nam Ngum over to Tha Tham Bleung, effectively revisiting much of the same real estate it had covered during its first deployment to MR 2 the previous spring.

Eight days later, Savannakhet Unit offered a second regiment, GM 30, which had been reconstructed at Nong Saphong since the exhausting, seesaw Phoutah battles along Route 9. It now featured a new commander, Major Chanh Nosavan, a former FAR paratrooper with a solid resumé as head of an SGU battalion. The regiment also had a new case officer, Eli "Supermex" Chavez.

Immediately after its arrival, GM 30 was loaded into choppers and deployed north and west of Phou Long Mat. Along with GM 31 to its immediate south, GM 30 collected Thai stragglers, who were immediately lifted back to Long Tieng, then rushed to a new Unity training centre at Nam Phong, Thailand.

Other reinforcements came from Luang Prabang in the form of BGs 121 and 122, dispatched to the westernmost end of Skyline Ridge, then shifted six kilometres south of Long Tieng to guard against infiltration from the rear. Unity, too, increased its contribution on 27 December with the arrival of a fresh battery, call-signed Thunder, which was positioned on the same ridge as the king's villa. One day later, Unity established two more batteries, Samson and Candle, also near the king's villa.

Despite these additions, PAVN continued its advance. Far worse, on the afternoon of 31 December PAVN fired its first 130mm shells into the Long Tieng valley. With that, General Tan looked to steer Campaign Z toward a dramatic conclusion.

Problems Down South

In MR 4, too, PAVN sought to register a decisive dry season blow. Earlier in August 1971, PAVN had ordered the expansion of Group 968 into the 968th Division. At its core was the battle-tested 9th Regiment, which had withdrawn from Paksong in September bloodied but still formidable. To this was added the 19th Regiment and a third regiment, the new 39th, baptised by fire during the North Vietnamese retake of Saravane in early December.

Against this, RLG defences on the central Bolovens were spearheaded by the Unity troops of Task Force Phasouk. Northeast and east of Paksong were two Thai infantry battalions. And adding punch just west of Paksong were the four 105mm howitzers of FSB Lightning.

Reinforcing Unity was MR 4's newest irregular regiment, GM 42, which acted as a screening force forward of the Thai.

Moving on these forces, the 968th Division, having already evicted the RLG from Thateng and Saravane, dispatched a battalion southwest down Route 23. Beginning on 7 December they hammered Unity and GM 42, pushing back both toward Paksong by the third week of the month.

Scrambling to reinforce the front, Task Force Phasouk on 20 December received a fresh battalion, BC 619. Unlike previous Unity battalions, BC 619 had its cadre drawn from the Royal Thai Marines. This was because the RTA had grown weary of providing high-calibre cadre to the expanding Unity roster; to compensate, other Thai branches of service were being pressed to lend a hand.

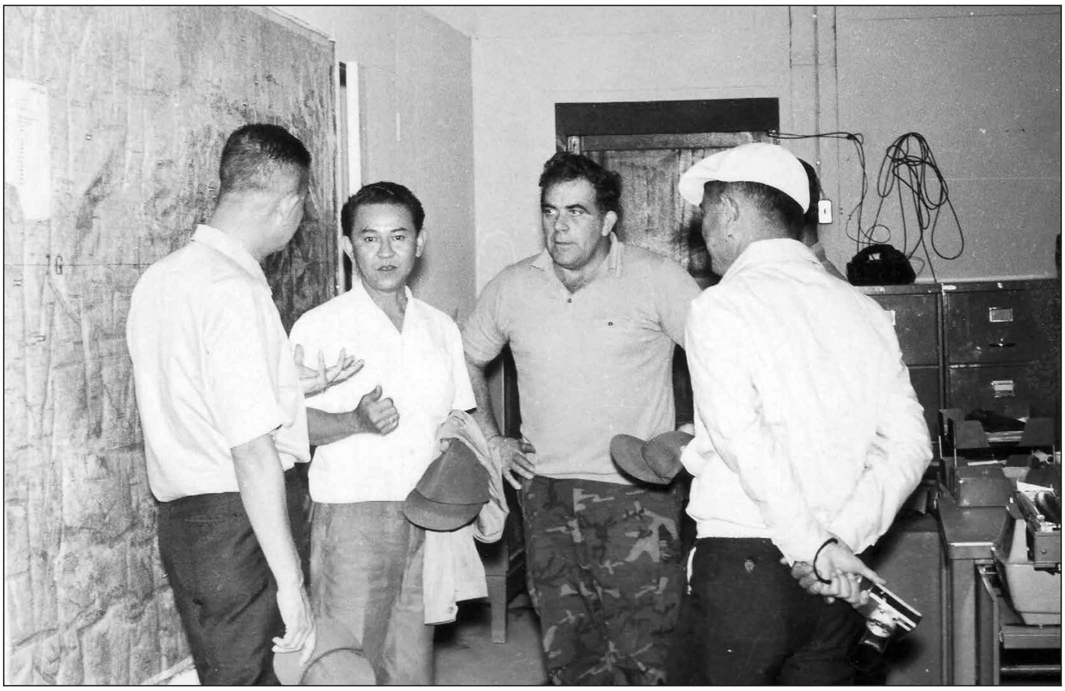
Rushed to the frontline, BC 619 wilted at its first contact with PAVN and fled west. Immediately thereafter, PAVN moved antiaircraft guns close to Paksong, and then circled troops west of the town to cut Route 23. Sensing an attack was imminent, the Paksong garrison and Unity troops filtered west in disorganised fashion. PAVN entered the town on their heels, setting fire to what was left.

With Paksong lost, GM 42 was ordered to form a defensive line near Ban Gnik. However, a PAVN onslaught on 6 January 1972 completely overwhelmed the regiment, killing nearly half its members. Bodies littered the road and the remnants of GM 42 were pulled back for retraining, leaving the path open for a direct attack on Pakse.

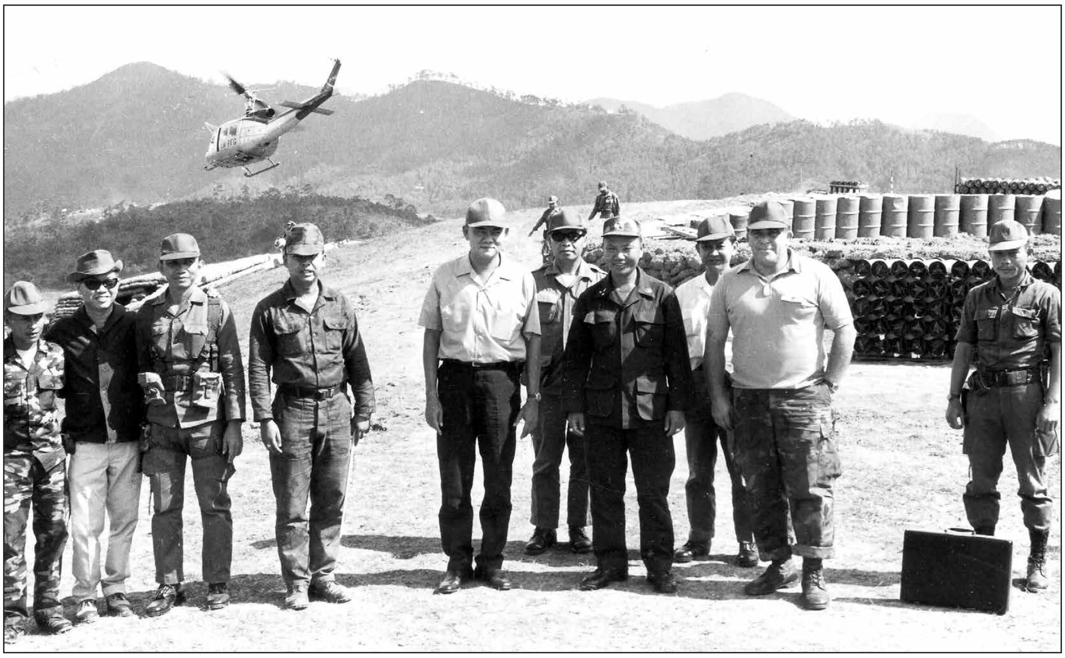
On the Ropes

By the first week of January 1972, Le Trong Tan was giving the Hmong heartland its greatest challenge to date. Already, the 312th Division, which had spearheaded the attack against the eastern PDJ, had moved all three of its regiments southwest of the plain. The 316th Division, after consolidating its hold over Ban Na, headed south along with the 866th Regiment, while the 335th Regiment came to rest just east of Long Tieng. In all, intercepted PAVN communications indicated that some 24 North Vietnamese battalions, backed by a formidable array of heavy weapons, were to be used for a final push against Skyline Ridge.

The use of such firepower – especially 130mm field guns – was of particular concern to Long Tieng. Except for limited employment along the Demilitarized Zone against U.S. Marines, PAVN had rarely unleashed its 130mm artillery, and never in mobile, tactical situations. Despite the fact that the guns were being fired at their maximum range (27 kilometres) and constantly shifted to avoid airstrikes – both actions inhibiting accuracy – the whistling scream



During a period of intense PAVN incoming fire, RTA Lieutenant General Serm Na-Nakorn (left) visited Long Tieng for a briefing in early 1972. Also present was Headquarters 333 deputy commander Dhon (second from left), senior Unity advisor Doug Swanson, and General Paitoon Inkatanawat (right). (Photo courtesy Doug Swanson)



Vang Pao, Headquarters 333 deputy chief Dhon (third from right), and senior Unity advisor Doug Swanson pose with a visiting RTA delegation headed by Lieutenant General Serm Na-Nakorn (centre). Long Tieng, early 1972. (Photo courtesy Doug Swanson)

of incoming 130mm rounds quickly demoralised the Long Tieng defenders.

Jim "Sword" Lewis and Brigadier General Thao Ly, chief of staff of MR 3 guerrilla forces, inspect GM 31 positions in MR 2, early January 1972. Lewis was added to GM 31 as a second case officer during the deployment, as his own GM 32 was in the midst of retraining in Thailand. (Photo courtesy Oroth Insisiengmay)

By 5 January 1972, about 600 rounds had cleared Skyline and fallen inside the valley, including some that destroyed the T-28 ramp and an ammunition dump. "Comparing our 155mm howitzers with their 130s," concluded Ken "Cannonball" Ball, a CIA case officer attached to the Unity artillery units, "was like Mickey Mouse competing with Rasputin in the love department."

As Long Tieng was being pummelled by artillery, Vang Pao's Hmong troops could offer little help. GMs 21 and 23, both bled white, had been quickly regrouped at Sam Thong; neither, for the time, was able to make a positive contribution to the war effort. GMs 22 and 24, in relatively better shape with a combined total of just 40 dead, had been committed on Christmas Day to the defence of Padong. Only a handful of Hmong guerrillas had retreated to Long Tieng, but after Vang Pao was evacuated to Udorn on 4 January with what was diagnosed as viral pneumonia, these troops had gone on a looting spree.

In little better condition was Unity's Task Force Vang Pao. By the first of the year, all eight infantry battalions that had been on the PDJ were lifted back to Thailand for retraining. That left just three Unity battalions in MR 2, all of them pulled back toward Long Tieng.

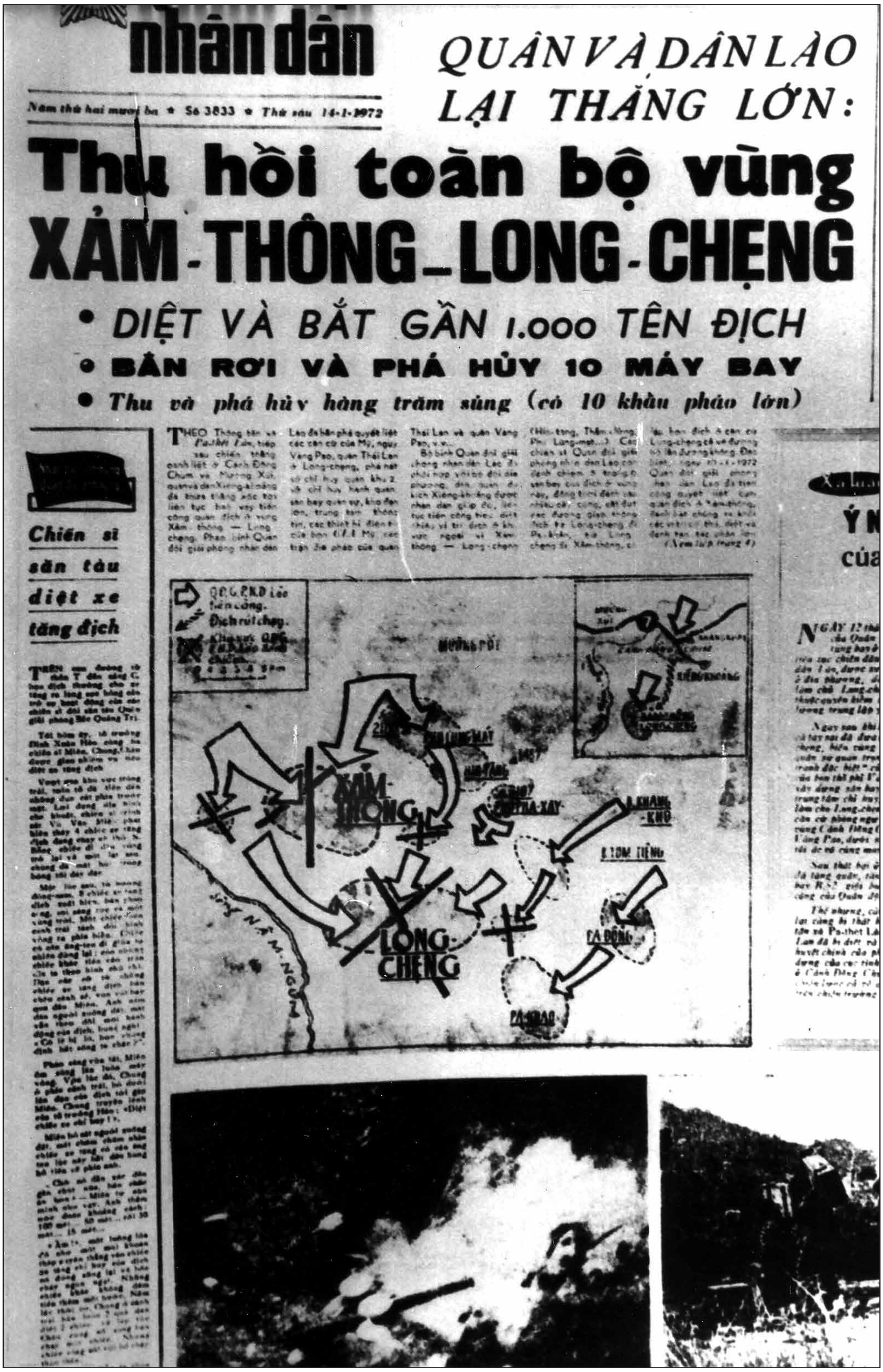
Not surprisingly, Vang Pao had little choice but to lean heavily on the two Savannakhet regiments and three irregular battalions from MR 1. Of these, GM 31 was still holding the line between the Nam Ngum and Tha Tham Bleung, while GM 30, which had been northwest of Phou Long Mat, on 6 January was shifted south to Zebra Ridge. As for the MR 1 battalions, they were in blocking positions midway between Long Tieng and Sam Thong.

Given the size of the PAVN threat, these defences were far from adequate. Having earlier come to this conclusion, Long Tieng Unit had spent the first week of January dispersing its operations to other locations. Most of the slack was taken up by Ban Son. The main MR 2 refugee centre since March 1970, Ban Son beginning in the last week of 1971 had become staging base for all Air America/CASI fixed-wing and RLAF T-28 operations previously at Long Tieng.

These moves came none too soon. On the night of 7 January, PAVN sappers infiltrated Long Tieng yet again and destroyed the remainder of the ammunition dump hit by a 130mm round four days earlier. More serious were Vietnamese commandos penetrating into the Long Tieng valley on the night of 9 January, attacking the CIA quarters, Vang Pao's house and the radio station with B-40 rockets. In addition, one pallet of 155mm ammunition was spiked.

While the sappers quickly receded, PAVN infantry were moving forward for a stronger push. On 11 January, they struck at Long Tieng from the north, east and northeast. Worst of all, they sent the Unity battalion defending the central highpoint on Skyline pouring down into the Long Tieng valley.

With PAVN quickly filling the vacuum atop Skyline, Long Tieng's future looked bleak. Anticipating the worst, RTA General Prapas



nhân dân

Năm thứ hai mươi ba ★ Số 3833 ★ Thứ sáu 14-1-1972

QUÂN VÀ DÂN LÀO LẠI THẮNG LỚN:

Thu hồi toàn bộ vùng XẢM-THÔNG–LONG-CHẸNG

- DIỆT VÀ BẮT GẦN 1.000 TÊN ĐỊCH
- BẮN RƠI VÀ PHÁ HỦY 10 MÁY BAY
- Thu và phá hủy hàng trăm súng (có 10 khẩu pháo lớn)

Chiến sĩ săn tàu diệt xe tăng địch

Địch rút chạy.
MƯỜNG PỒT
XẢM-THÔNG
PHU THA-XAY
B. KHANG-KHÚ
B. TOM TIẾNG
LONG-CHẸNG
PA ĐÔNG
Sông NẶM NGÙM

The 14 January 1972 edition of PAVN's *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* daily newspaper reported the "capture" of Sam Thong and Long Tieng. This boast proved to be premature, as Long Tieng never fell to the PAVN. (Photo courtesy Chuck Campbell)

Charusathien on 11 January publicly proclaimed that it might grant Vang Pao permission to move his troops to Thai territory for "humanitarian" reasons.

Slightly more optimistic about Long Tieng's longevity was the CIA. On 11 January, several of Long Tieng's senior case officers took a vote. By a slim margin, they decided to try to hold the valley. Immediately thereafter, construction began on two hardened underground bunkers – one for Unity case officers, the other for Hmong case officers – both on the same ridge as the king's villa.

Next, GM 30 was ordered on 12 January to retake Skyline Ridge. Loading into choppers at Zebra Ridge, the regiment was shuttled back to Long Tieng. From there, the Lao troops hiked up to the chopper pad on the western end of the ridge. By 17 January, GM 30, with support from artillery, Unity troops and B-52 strikes on the northern face of Skyline, managed to work its way three kilometres east at the cost of 35 dead and 69 wounded. On the following day, the regiment dashed a final 700 meters and reoccupied the high point with little resistance. Except for the easternmost reaches of the ridgeline, Skyline was back in RLG hands.

Shortly thereafter, the Long Tieng front was shored up with major Unity reinforcements. On 24 January, two reconstituted Thai battalions returned from Nam Phong. The next day they were joined by four more. Besides infantry, Unity was also expanding its artillery presence around Long Tieng. During the previous two weeks, FSB Thunder, formerly near the king's villa, had been moved forward to Sam Thong. Construction also had begun on two Thai firebases nine kilometres south of Long Tieng: FSB Samson, earlier near the king's villa; and a fresh unit called FSB Hercules. In addition, two batteries, Candle I and Candle II, were positioned on the high ground southeast of the Long Tieng valley.

With this sizable injection of Unity forces, Vang Pao readjusted his defensive line. GM 31 on 15 January was pulled back to join GMs 21 and 23 at Sam Thong. Two Luang Prabang battalions were shifted to cover the western approaches to the Long Tieng valley, while two others from MR 1 were redeployed to the vicinity of the king's villa.

Cargo handlers grew tired of the constant heavy-weapons fire dropping into Long Tieng during January 1972. The king's villa, built during a royal visit to Long Tieng in 1966, is visible on the ridge in the background. (Photo courtesy Doug Swanson)

Meantime, two more reconstituted Unity battalions on 27 January arrived in MR 2. All told, Task Force Vang Pao now totalled a dozen battalions divided between the Long Tieng valley and the western half of Skyline. This allowed an exhausted GM 30 to walk off the ridge on 30 January for a total refitting back in MR 3. Long Tieng, against much doubt, would live to see February.

Operation Strength

Although welcoming the lull in fighting, Vang Pao could hardly take comfort knowing that some 22 PAVN battalions still remained in the vicinity of Long Tieng – and with more than three months to go before the monsoon rains. Assuming PAVN pressure would increase in February, the Hmong general since 16 January had been formulating plans for GMs 22 and 24 to launch Operation Strength, a diversionary strike beginning 1 February north out of Padong.

Learning of the plan, the CIA initially offered strong protest. As Station Chief Tovar wrote in a message to the Long Tieng Chief of Unit Dick Johnson: "This strikes me as the ultimate in unrealism."

Despite such opposition, Vang Pao forged ahead. By 23 January, he had expanded Operation Strength on paper to include GMs 21, 22, 23 and 24, plus a Savannakhet regiment and the MR 1 contingent. To meet this requirement, on 1 February GM 31 began movement to Padong; GM 21 followed later that same week.

To lend more teeth to Strength, Savannakhet Unit was persuaded to commit a second regiment to the operation. On 3 February, a well-rested GM 33 began movement to Long Tieng. In as the regiment's newest commander was Lieutenant Colonel Vatsana, the former head of GM 30.

On 6 February – six days behind schedule – the combined Strength forces headed northeast from Padong and Pha Khao. Few PAVN were encountered as the Hmong and Lao irregulars entered the hills east of Phou Louang, the old FSB Cobra site. As a diversion for the main Strength forces, a smaller Hmong column simultaneously staged south from Bouamlong toward the Route 7-71 junction. Composed of 120 irregulars siphoned from GM 24 and elements of Cher Pao Moua's ADC (the latter regrouped into a new Hmong regiment, GM 27), this northern task force, like its southern counterpart, encountered few Vietnamese.

By the beginning of the second week of February, PAVN slowly began to react to Strength. Another week after that, North Vietnamese resistance escalated sharply. Looking to stage a diversion within a diversion, Long Tieng Unit the next afternoon arranged for a USAF C-130 to drop a massive BLU-82 bomb off the western edge of the PDJ. Immediately thereafter, a chopper armada arrived over the blast zone, and inserted a small team into the clearing. The team quickly exfiltrated, but not before intentionally leaving behind empty crates and cigarette butts on the landing zone. The charade, called Operation Moonmark, continued for the next week as Twin Otters overflew the vicinity to play the sound of helicopter rotors through loudspeakers and drop phantom-rigged parachutes.

Meantime, PAVN was confronting the Strength diversion in ever greater numbers. On 23 February, GM 33 was forced to withdraw south through GM 22/24 positions, while the 105mm howitzer was removed from Phou Khe and part of GM 31 shifted west to link with the withdrawing forces. Two days later, GM 10A, an ad hoc Nam Yu-Xieng Lom irregular regiment, was

Thai FAG Rossini peers down on Long Tieng valley from Skyline Two after the ridge's recapture, February 1972. (Photo courtesy S. Ascharya)

During Operation Strength II, MR 2 commander Vang Pao, Brigadier General Bouathong Phothivongsa (second from left) and FAR commander Bounpone (right) gather with Bouamlong chieftain Cher Pao Moua to await the arrival of GM 31, 15 March 1972. (Photo courtesy Hugh Tovar)

rushed to Padong to cover their egress. Though all units were in full retreat by 2 March, Strength had managed to draw an estimated 11 battalions out of the immediate Long Tieng vicinity. In doing so, Strength had managed to forestall any dramatic military reversal in MR 2 during Nixon's high-profile visit to Beijing during the second half of February.

Though vindicated in his Strength gamble, Vang Pao still faced elements of six Vietnamese regiments southwest of the PDJ, all of them still relatively fresh. In addition, a forward command post was established for Front 74B (the successor to Le Trong Tan's Campaign Z headquarters) just northeast of Long Tieng.

Preparing for the worst, Vang Pao spent early March reinforcing his Long Tieng defences. More than ever was he leaning on the Thai of Task Force Vang Pao. This included two battalions on loan from Task Force Phasouk and one borrowed from Task Force Rathikoun.

The same day these new Unity battalions arrived, PAVN – after a month-long hiatus – began raining 130mm artillery into the Long Tieng valley. Simultaneously, Vietnamese troops managed to infiltrate a recoilless rifle onto the eastern extreme of Skyline, using it to bombard the runway and Vang Pao's house. Three days later, BG 224 – the lone Hmong unit atop Skyline – fled the high point in the face of a heavy-weapons and infantry assault. PAVN immediately consolidated its hold over the summit.

More critical was the situation at Sam Thong. On the evening of 10 March, three Vietnamese battalions hit the town perimeter, splitting its Unity defenders. By the following afternoon, most of the Thai were heading toward Skyline. Still held by one Unity battalion, Sam Thong was hit the following week by an armoured personnel carrier and five tanks. In desperation, the Thai soldiers tried unsuccessfully to shell the vehicles with a mortar. Finally, as the tanks got close, two LAW rockets were fired. One scored a direct hit; the second misfired. As the remaining armour overran the Unity bunkers, the battalion fled in disarray.

As this was transpiring, Vang Pao was conjuring an operation to hit the communists south and northeast of the PDJ. Named, appropriately, Strength II, the plan involved five of the six GMs returning from the first Strength venture. By 6 March, all five had regrouped to the rear and were divided into two pincers: GMs 21, 31, and 33 slated for an airlift to Bouamlong in order to again try to cut the Route 7-71 junction, while GMs 22 and 24 were to chopper into the hills immediately north of Xieng Khouangville.

The southern half of Strength II, named Task Force Bravo, completed its infiltration during the third week of March without incident. By the end of that week, advance elements of the task force got within seven kilometres of Phongsavan. PAVN, however, refused to rise to the bait. By month's end, the Hmong irregulars continued to operate with little effect and against little opposition.

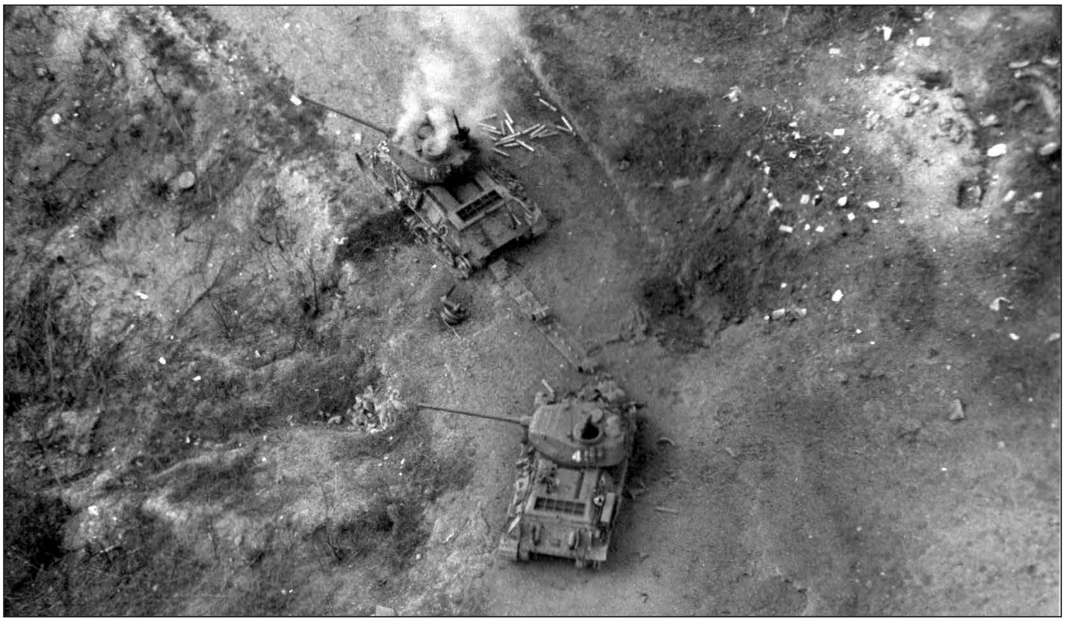
More problematic was the northern Strength II contingent, Task Force Alpha, which began forming at Bouamlong with the arrival of GM 21 on 14 March. GMs 31 and 33, having regrouped at Pha Khao, were slated to follow the next day. The Savannakhet troops, however, were suffering from low morale; the GM 31 commander had already made clear to CIA advisor Montana that his men, having long exceeded their promised 60-day return date, would revolt if sent on another mission in MR 2.

When both MR 3 case officers insisted that their regiments proceed to Bouamlong, the units, as promised, mutinied. As word of the revolt spread, Station Chief Tovar flew to Pha Khao. There he found GM 33's Lieutenant Colonel Vatsana closeted inside a hut, praying. Promising Vatsana he would return the next day with FAR Commander Bounpone Makthepharak, Tovar left for Vientiane. True to his word, he was back at Pha Khao the following morning with the FAR chief. Addressing the troops on the Pha Khao runway, General Bounpone appealed to their patriotism. Cheering, the troops began to file into six CH-53 Knives for an initial lift to Bouamlong.

Assuming the issue had passed, Tovar and Bounpone flew ahead to Bouamlong. As soon as they departed Pha Khao, however, chaos erupted. Half of GM 31 deserted, as did more than half of GM 33. Trucks were quickly dispatched to Ban Son, where the rebel troops were retrieved, disarmed, and shipped to MR 3.

On 18 March, GM 21 and the MR 3 remnants were ready to move south from Bouamlong against the Route 7-71 junction. The following day, however, the Savannakhet irregulars again balked and began taking shots at passing Porters. Finally, with GM 21 in the lead, Task Force Alpha departed Bouamlong, closing on Nong Pet within a week. By 30 March, Cher Pao Moua's GM 27 joined the fray, hovering with the others in the hills overlooking the road junction. Like Task Force Bravo to the south, however, PAVN barely stirred, dispatching just two battalions to counter the feeble RLG advance.

Southwest of the PDJ, the Vietnamese still had their sights set on Long Tieng. Within a day after capturing Sam Thong on 18 March, PAVN troops from the 165th Regiment had been able to seize a chopper pad on the western end of Skyline. Adding to the central



After consolidating their hold over Sam Thong on 12 March 1972, PAVN the following week sent three T-34 tanks toward Long Tieng. Two of the three reached Skyline Ridge, but were disabled by mines sown by Unity troops. As shown by the brass casings, one tank continued to fire even after losing its tracks. (Photo courtesy Mike Ingham)

pads already under the control of the 335th Independent Regiment, Vietnamese again dominated the ridgeline. The 316th Division and 866th Independent Regiment, meanwhile, were making preparations for a direct strike on the Long Tieng valley.

Ordered to retake Skyline was Task Force Vang Pao. Spearheading the assault were BCs 601A and 602A, both of which had returned to MR 2 on 23 March after a brief rest in Thailand. Storming up the ends of the summit, the Thai troops gained toeholds on opposite peripheries. On top of these gains, BC 604A scaled the western slopes and wrested back control over the chopper pad overlooking the dirt road linking Long Tieng with Sam Thong. Immediately afterward, a Thai-U.S. engineering team from Udorn choppered to Skyline with a load of M19 antitank mines and planted them along this road.

This effort proved prescient, for on the night of 29 March a trio of T-34s headed south from Sam Thong toward Skyline. As the armour neared, BC 604A troops took aim with a 75mm recoilless rifle, drawing accurate counterfire from the PAVN tanks. Panicking, the Unity soldiers fled their positions along the road leading into Long Tieng. Unity case officer Hardnose listened over the radio as his Thai units withered:

> A Spectre gunship with a 105mm cannon had arrived overhead and could see the tank exhaust on its infrared, but it was cloudy that night and without visual identification, they weren't allowed to fire. At that point, two of the tanks hit mines and lost their treads; they continued firing toward Long Tieng until their ammunition was finished. The last tank fled.

Though its armoured attack had fallen short, PAVN by late March was confident Long Tieng would soon be taken. To forestall this, Unity redoubled its efforts to clear Skyline. With BCs pressing from the east and west, and Unity artillery adding withering fire, the Thai made repeated forays through the month of April. Still, a diehard pocket of Vietnamese was dug into spider holes on the highest ground.

In desperation, Vang Pao called on his Commando Raiders to conduct a daylight assault. As ordered, case officer Dick "Bamboo" Manns flew in a detachment from Pha Khao and gallantly headed up the slopes. Totally exposed, their attempt failed. Finally, following a series of B-52 strikes across the northern face of Skyline, Bamboo's raiders on the night of 28 April again charged up the summit. By dawn, the high ground was in Hmong hands; PAVN's final stand, it was found, had been carried out by only six remaining Vietnamese.

Fa Ngum

Mirroring the seesaw battles on Skyline was the contest to control Route 23 in MR 4. In mid-January, GM 42, holding a weak frontline at Ban Gnik, had been literally massacred in place. Pushing west, the PAVN 9th Regiment descended the Bolovens toward the village of Laongam, just 21 kilometres east of Pakse. There it faced a new, hastily assembled RLG front manned by two Unity battalions and the relocated FSB Lightning.

Although Thai morale at Laongam was low – more than 300 deserted while another 165 contracted malaria – the Unity contingent succeeded in buying time for a RLG counterattack. On 11 February, three FAR battalions were selected for Operation Sinsay ("Victory"), the planned retake of Ban Gnik. This went nowhere, allowing a pair of PAVN battalions and T-34 tanks to move forward and hike pressure on Laongam. Overwhelmed, the Unity volunteers abandoned their positions and withdrew toward FSB Lightning.

Even though the situation had never been so bleak for Pakse, two days later – in a dramatic demonstration of priorities – both Unity battalions were withdrawn from MR 4 and sent north to help defend Long Tieng – leaving Lightning alone to face the advancing Vietnamese. Compounding matters for the remaining MR 4 defenders, the PAVN 39th Regiment, previously holding Saravane, starting dispatching elements toward the Thai gunners.

Before the 39th Regiment troops could reach their target, GM 41, rebuilt after its costly baptism of fire at Thateng the previous year, began movement from Khong Sedone on an interception course. This had the desired result of attracting the Vietnamese, drawing attention away from Lightning.

To further disrupt the 39th Regiment, on 15 March the 1,100-strong GM 43, MR 4's third irregular regiment fresh out of PS 18 training, was placed onto the northern rim of the Bolovens. Moving west, the regiment reached Route 231, and then pressed southwest. Combined with the GM 41 stab from Khong Sedone, this forced the PAVN 39th Regiment to begin a full retreat east.

Although the 39th Regiment was temporarily eliminated as a threat, the 9th Regiment still posed problems along Route 23. Its own irregulars either engaged or disabled, Pakse Unit sent an urgent call to Savannakhet. At that time, however, all MR 3 regiments were either in MR 2 or retraining. As an interim measure, GM 30, still weak from its January Skyline campaign, offered two battalions. Shipped south during the third week of March, the half-regiment trucked to Lightning, then continued along Route 23 by foot. Over the next 12 days, GM 30 troops worked their way to Laongam against light opposition, holding the village for three days before withdrawing to Pakse and returning back to Whiskey-3.

Though it had offered temporary relief, GM 30's brief push into Laongam did little to loosen PAVN's grip on Route 23. Looking to make a bigger impact, Pakse Unit on 1 April completed plans for Operation Fa Ngum (named after the first Lao king), a heliborne infiltration behind the 9th Regiment to cut its lines of supply and force PAVN's withdrawal. Picked for the operation was GM 32, thoroughly refitted since its MR 4 operations late the previous year.

Boarding choppers, GM 32 was airlifted without incident to a landing zone just south of Ban Gnik. From there the regiment headed southwest toward the suspected location of the 9th Regiment headquarters. After covering five kilometres, clashes increased, as did incoming PAVN heavy-weapons rounds. Antiaircraft fire and heavy foliage, however, precluded effective close air support. After one week, GM 32 began to emerge from the western edge of the Bolovens. In exchange for suffering heavy casualties, communication intercepts confirmed that GM 32's manoeuvre had forced the entire 9th Regiment to withdraw 15 kilometres east of Laongam.

Seeking to maintain pressure, Pakse Unit on 15 April called for a second phase to Fa Ngum. According to their reworked plan, GM 32 would lead a task force (along with GM 41 and some FAR) pushing east along Route 23 as far as possible.

With FAR M706 scout cars at its side, the Savannakhet irregulars advanced against moderate opposition. Entering Ban Gnik, the troops' morale plummeted when they found more than 100 rotting corpses of GM 42 soldiers killed in January. That, plus hardening PAVN resistance and their own exhaustion after fighting for three weeks, sent the task force falling backward toward Laongam.

Arriving at Laongam, CIA advisor Sword ordered GM 32 to dig in and create a new frontline. In response, two battalions deserted west on 24 April, reluctantly returning only after desperate pleading. As another SGU mutiny seemed imminent, GM 32 was sent home three days later. With an anaemic blocking force left behind at Laongam, MR 4 was left counting the days to the start of the monsoons.

8

PARTING SHOTS

On 17 May, the rainy season broke over MR 2. By that time, the PAVN threat around the PDJ had substantially decreased, with some of the PAVN infantry siphoned off to participate in the Easter Offensive in South Vietnam. Although four North Vietnamese regiments remained in the region, Vang Pao felt the climate safe enough to begin the long overdue process of refitting his Hmong guerrilla army. Accordingly, GM 24 in late April was sent down to Moung Cha for a four-week retraining cycle; GM 23 rotated through the camp the following month, and GM 22 was assembled for shipment down to Phitscamp.

Along with retraining his tired Hmong ranks, Vang Pao began a limited late dry season offensive southwest of the PDJ. To begin, in mid-April case officer George "Kayak" Bacon and BG 224 walked west off Skyline, then followed the Nam Ngum in a clockwise arc around PAVN-held Sam Thong. By 7 May, the battalion occupied the high ground overlooking Ban Na from the south.

Next, Task Force Vang Pao – exclusively manning the Long Tieng defences – on 8 May dispatched six battalions toward Sam Thong. Within three days, the Thai troops retook the town, their grip consolidated five days later with the establishment of two new Unity firebases, Eagle and Sparrow.

Third, five battalions – two Hmong, three on loan from MR 1 – were assembled near Padong for a push to the northwest. On 8 May, all five headed toward Phou Phasai, held by the 335th Regiment. For the North Vietnamese, control over Phou Phasai was critical because it offered an ideal jumping-off point to hit Long Tieng the next dry season. Showing dogged resistance, they kept the five-battalion task force at bay through mid-month. Even after two Unity battalions and GM 30 were added to the fray, they could not dent PAVN's defences.

Worse, Hanoi dispatched two new infantry battalions to Phou Phasai, relieving the 335th Regiment. This deployment was significant because it marked the beginning of the first phase of PAVN's rainy season plans for MR 2. For the first time, Hanoi was dictating that its forces defend all of their Xieng Khouang holdings through the monsoons.

As instructed, PAVN gave no ground through mid-year. Heeding a late June call for reinforcements, Savannakhet Unit offered up GM 31. Arriving at Long Tieng on 2 July, the regiment was set to be lifted to the vicinity of Hill 1800, one kilometre northwest of Tha Tham Bleung. Just as GM 31 was prepared to launch from Long Tieng, however, communications intercepts revealed that the North Vietnamese knew of the planned infiltration and had given its PDJ-based artillery instructions to begin shelling the helicopter landing zones as soon as the first choppers landed.

Knowing this, Colonel Chong Shoua Yang – Vang Pao's designated field commander – and GM 31's Lieutenant Colonel Khamphou decided to launch the mission from Sam Thong by foot. By 5 July, the Savannakhet regiment had circled around Tha Tham Bleung and by the following week took Hill 1800 against little opposition. Immediately thereafter, PAVN gunners moved into range east of the hill and kept the irregulars pinned down.

On 16 July, GM 30, mired off the southeastern face of Phou Phasai for two months, started abandoning its positions and was rotated back to MR 3. This, together with the lack of progress at Hill 1800, led a frustrated Vang Pao on 17 July to issue a new set of orders to GM 3l. According to his reworked plan, GM 31 would split into separate battalions and attack individual targets from the Tha Tham Bleung valley down to Phou Phasai. Before the GM could make any headway, however, they once again were stopped cold by PAVN heavy-weapons fire.

By the third week of July, Vang Pao had precious little to show for his rainy season efforts. To that time, he had refrained from launching a major monsoon offensive because of the need to retrain and recruit more Hmong. But with retraining set to conclude by mid-September, the general on 26 July ventured to Udorn for a planning session with Pat Landry, Dick Johnson and General Dhep. By coincidence, Nixon had been discussing MR 2 with Kissinger

By 1972, Unity battalions were graduating at a furious pace from Nam Phong. With rare exception, their uniforms were devoid of unit or rank insignia. (Photo courtesy Mike Ingham)

the same day, with Nixon making no secret of his desire to regain control of the PDJ.

Reflecting the president's bullish proclivities, those at Udorn hatched plans for a massive rainy season offensive codenamed Operation Phou Phiang II ("Plateau II"). The first phase, extending through September, would involve the Thai, two MR 2 GMs and GM 31. Of these, the Unity and Savannakhet troops would pressure Ban Hintang and Phou Phasai. Meanwhile, GM 23 would move from Padong to Phou Louang. Another MR 2 regiment – GM 22 – would strike at Ban Na, and then turn toward Phou Seu. The purpose of these opening moves was twofold: to pull PAVN reinforcements southwest of the plain, and to seize Phou Seu as a staging point onto the PDJ.

With PAVN theoretically moving reinforcements southwest off the PDJ, two MR 2 regiments – GM 21 and the newly formed GM 26 – would be heliborne into the resultant vacuum created along the northern plain near Phou Keng and Phou San. At the same time, GMs 22 and 23 would be relieved in place by one Unity regiment (the Thai had started gathering their battalions into GMs) and one MR 3 GM.

Once these moves were accomplished, Phou Phiang II's second phase would begin. To start, GM 24, reinforced by Bouamlong's resident GM 27, would head south toward Route 7-71. This, it was thought, would force PAVN to begin moving back from southwest of the PDJ. Next, GMs 22 and 23 would be choppered to landing zones northeast of Xieng Khouangville. From there, one regiment would go south and hit Route 72; the other would move north against Nong Pet in conjunction with the Bouamlong task force. Next, an MR 1 GM would be choppered between Phou San and Phou Keng. This would allow one of the previously inserted MR 2 GMs to move down to Ban Thang to act as a reserve. Finally, a new MR 2 regiment, GM 28, would stage mobile operations north and east of Ban Ban.

With PAVN having withdrawn (it was hoped) from the PDJ in disarray, Phou Phiang II was to conclude with a defensive blueprint for the plain. Around the PDJ itself, eight Unity infantry battalions would hold eight mountaintops ringing the plain. Having learned their lesson the previous year, Unity would establish no permanent firebases on the PDJ; instead, two Thai artillery battalions would operate mobile artillery, moved on and off the plain via the PAVN-built road to Tha Tham Bleung.

Concluding the 26 July meeting, Vang Pao was brimming with confidence he could retake the plain. Flying back to Long Tieng, the general still had two weeks to prepare. Looking to get an early start, he ordered the Unity and GM 31 troops around Zebra Ridge and Tha Tham Bleung – collectively forming Phou Phiang's Task Force Alpha – to begin initial movement toward Phou Phasai and Ban Hintang, thereby attempting to draw North Vietnamese reinforcements into the sector. PAVN, however, did not rise to the challenge.

Despite problems with Task Force Alpha, the general proceeded with the Phou Phiang II master plan. His next task force, named Bravo, consisted solely of GM 22. On 11 August, the regiment, along with new case officer James "Mule" Parker, was inserted 13 kilometres northwest of Ban Na. From there, it headed directly east toward the Jungle's Mouth, the nickname given to the bite-shaped western edge of the PDJ. Within four days, its objective was secured without opposition.

On 13 August, Phou Phiang's Task Force Charlie, consisting of GM 23, boarded choppers for a narrow valley southeast of the PDJ. Regrouping on the soggy landing zone, the regiment immediately headed west toward Khang Kho, an 11-kilometre trek.

Forty-eight hours later, Task Force Echo began to assemble at Bouamlong. The core of that task force, GM 24, was fresh out of a Moung Cha refitting. Within a day, the GM 24 troops, accompanied by case officer Kayak, were moving south toward Nong Pet. By 18 August, elements of GM 27 were following in their wake.

That same day, Vang Pao issued new orders calling Task Force Alpha back to action. As before, half of GM 31 was to push east across the Tha Tham Bleung valley, while the other half, together with Thai troops and a Hmong battalion, was to head east along Zebra Ridge. Despite repeated prompting, however, they barely moved. It should be noted that as of June 1972, the need to turn out ever more Unity battalions had led them to start accepting Thai volunteers with no prior military experience; there was a noticeable drop in discipline in Unity battalions from that time forward.

One week into Phou Phiang II's official start, PAVN was clearly not reacting the way the planners had anticipated. With Task Force Alpha making little headway, the North Vietnamese had seen no

Hmong headquarters staff of Bataillon Guerrier 227 from GM 26, at Nam Pung Dam training camp in Thailand during the summer of 1972. Tom "Arkansas" Lum, the case officer assigned to GM 26, stands on the far left. GM 26 was plagued with problems during their training cycle, including an abundance of underaged conscripts, chronic heat exhaustion, a malaria outbreak, and instances of hashish abuse. (Photo courtesy Tom Lum)

reason to rush reinforcements southwest of the PDJ. Along the other fronts, meanwhile, PAVN was reacting in timely, measured fashion.

Still, Vang Pao pressed ahead with the next stage of his offensive: the insertion of Task Force Delta at Moung Kheung on the northern PDJ. Half of Delta consisted of GM 21, which that summer had been given a refitting at Phitscamp. The other half of Delta consisted of the new GM 26. This regiment had begun forming in early 1972 under Lieutenant Colonel Ly Lao, a Momentum-era chieftain. Tom "Arkansas" Lum, a Chinese-American and four-year Laos veteran, was its CIA advisor.

Freshly graduated from Nam Pung Dam camp in Thailand, GM 26 had returned to Long Tieng and waited with GM 21 until 20 August. With their heliborne insertion set for the following morning, an MR 2 Commando Raider force was to infiltrate that night to secure landing zones near Moung Kheung. Because a large contingent of commandos was deemed necessary, a small commando sub-set was to first infiltrate in an S-58T shortly after dusk, and the bulk of the force would parachute near midnight from an Air America C-130. As planned, an S-58T carrying Hog Daniels and four Hmong commandos departed Long Tieng after last light and headed for Moung Kheung. Landing the team unopposed, the chopper crew relayed the exact LORAN coordinates of the landing zone back to Long Tieng. Daniels and the Hmong detachment then unpacked an assortment of flashlights, phosphorus tubes and wand beacons to await the C-130.

For the airborne contingent, 72 Commando Raiders were shuttled from Pha Khao down to Vang Vieng, which since the previous month had been serving as the logistical support base for MR 2 (the CIA had been forced to relocate its support base from Ban Son after heavy flooding at the latter). Filing aboard a single Air America C-130, they parachuted without incident in multiple passes between 0030 and 0100 hours on 21 August.

At first light, GM 21 began CH-53 Knife shuttles north to the landing zone held by the commandos. By late afternoon, the entire regiment was in place. GM 26, delayed by bad weather, joined them on 24 August. From there, both GMs prepared to head south, with GM 21 to hold the area around Phou San and GM 26 to approach the monsoon-swollen Nam Ngum near Phou Keng. Despite strong air support, however, Task Force Delta had problems from the onset. Much of this was attributable to human resources: too many of the Hmong at that late hour were woefully underaged, with low morale and discipline.

Compounding problems was PAVN. Shifting a tank-led column toward Delta, they killed GM 26's executive officer and a battalion commander in an initial onslaught. As both GMs fled the scene, they attempted to cross the rain-swollen Nam Ngum. By morning, scores of Hmong were missing, some presumed drowned. Worse, a B-52 strike hit part of GM 26's scattered forces, killing several more irregulars and a FAG.

With both GMs streaming back in full retreat, tactical airpower was left with no front line to support. GM 21 managed to regroup near Ban Na; GM 26 was later reassembled at Long Tieng at just 40 percent of its original strength.

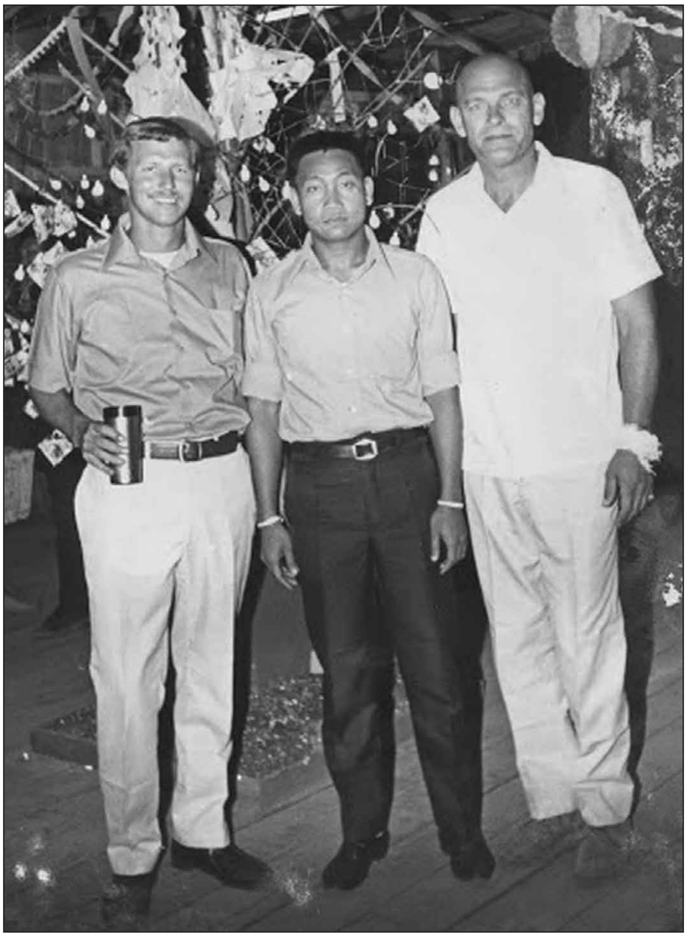
With Phou Phiang II falling hopelessly out of sync, Vang Pao on 1 September had flown down to Wattay for a meeting with Ambassador Godley. The general was informed that the operation could get no more than 18 U.S. sorties a day, due both to poor weather and higher priorities elsewhere in Southeast Asia. After digesting this, Vang Pao was asked whether he wanted to continue the campaign; knowing that Long Tieng's survival hinged on extending his hold around the plain, the general answered in the affirmative.

Returning to Long Tieng, Vang Pao tried through the first week of September to breathe life into the operation's task forces. Despite his prodding Alpha made little headway, and on 5 September was further weakened when GM 31 was lifted back to Savannakhet for refitting. Equally uninspired was Task Force Charlie, which appeared intent on avoiding any action. Task Force Echo was somewhat more animated, but then was hit by two accidental T-28 bombings. Following that, the bloodied regiment was recalled to Moung Cha for retraining, all but removing the threat from Echo.

Bravo alone was showing signs of progress. With GM 22 able to extend its reach on the plain to between Ban Thang and Moung Phanh, Task Force Vang Pao on 1 September choppered in one battalion as reinforcements. There, with improved weather allowing for more tactical air support, they managed to beat back the 335th Regiment.

With little else to show after one month of combat, Vang Pao moved to further reinforce his Bravo foothold. On 8 September, Savannakhet Unit offered Chanh Nosavan's GM 30 – its third trip to MR 2 and the second in less than two months. Seventy-two hours later, the regiment was heli-lifted to GM 22 positions near the western PDJ airstrip at Ban Thang. That day, too, a pair of Unity 105mm howitzers were hauled to the same vicinity, forming FSB Santi ("Peace").

Shortly thereafter, Task Force Charlie began to show signs of life. To build on this, Vang Pao early the next week designated MR 1's latest contribution, GM 15, as reinforcements. Composed of three Nam Yu battalions, GM 15 had just completed regimental training at Phitscamp. Assigned as its CIA advisor was Raymond "Thanh"



MR 2 case officer Burr Smith (right) and visiting MR 1 case officer Ray "Thanh" Seaborg (left) during a respite at Long Tieng, mid-1972. During his second deployment to Long Tieng with guerrillas on loan from Nam Yu, Seaborg was killed in the field on 25 September 1972. (Photo courtesy Cynthia S. Finn)

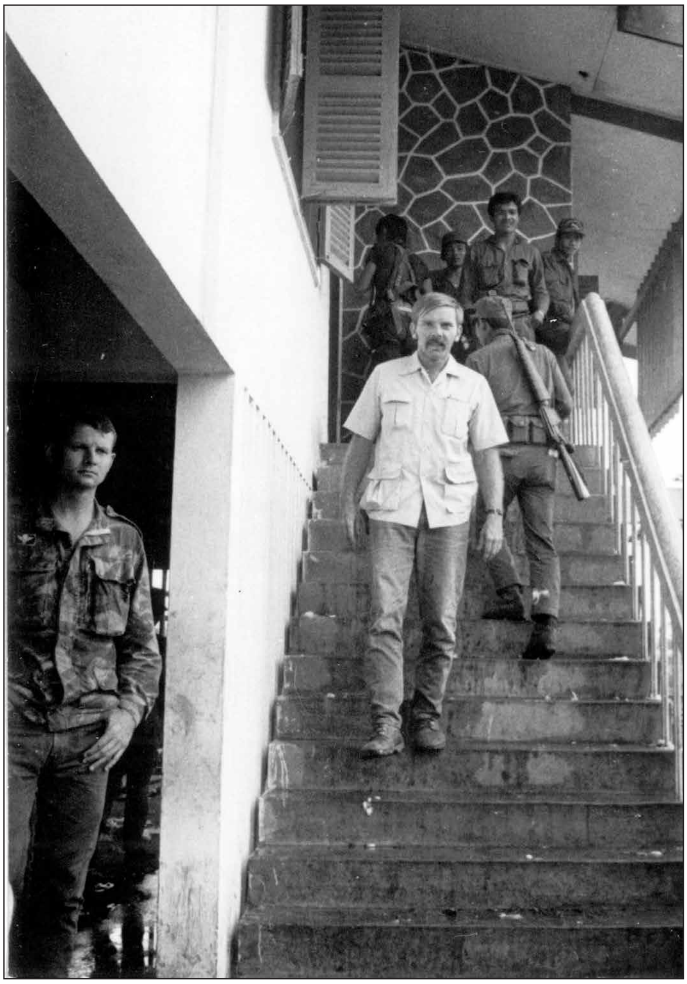
Seaborg, an ex-Marine engineer who had already been in MR 2 earlier that year with the prior Nam Yu rotation.

By 24 September, two of GM 15's battalions were at Long Tieng and being deployed in heavy rains to Khang Kho. Two days later, with the weather clearing, they were joined by the third and final battalion. Not paying attention to the time, the last chopper departed for Long Tieng and Seaborg had no choice but to spend the night in the field. As evening fell, PAVN heavy-weapons fire began to hit. This was followed by ground attacks during the early morning hours. As Seaborg fought back with an M16, an RPG round landed directly in front of his position and took off most of his face. He was the second CIA officer to die from enemy fire in Laos.

Along with this attack, PAVN was massing three battalions against Task Force Bravo. At 0720 hours, 26 September, Vietnamese infantry and artillery hit the Ban Thang airfield, destroying one of Santi's howitzers. Five hours later, GMs 22 and 30 were retreating west; Unity troops soon followed. Phou Phiang II, for all practical purposes, was dead in the water.

Black Lion

In MR 4, the conclusion of the 1971–72 dry season had left RLG forces on their worst footing to date. They held nothing on the Bolovens, and no sooner had Operation Fa Ngum concluded in late April 1972 than a resurgent PAVN 9th Regiment reclaimed Laongam, pushing the forwardmost RLG troops nine kilometres west down Route 23. Worse, during the third week of May PAVN did the unexpected: an early rainy season push by the 39th Regiment into the town of Khong Sedone.



GM 32 case officer Jim "Sword" Lewis and GM 42 case officer John "Thanh Mak" Peterson at the Lao officer's club in Pakse, 1972. Peterson, a former U.S. Army Special Forces sergeant who served with MACVSOG in South Vietnam, was killed when his Air America H-34 was downed by PAVN fire at Saravane in October 1972. Lewis was dispatched to South Vietnam in the spring of 1975 and captured when Phan Rang was overrun by PAVN that April. Quietly repatriated six months later, he was killed during the 1983 bombing of the US embassy in Beirut. (Photo courtesy Marti Peterson)

The fall of Khong Sedone – astride the Route 13 corridor between Pakse and Savannakhet – was for the RLG far more unacceptable than the loss of population centres farther east on the Bolovens. Accordingly, two immediate attempts – one by FAR, the other by GM 41 – were made at its retaking; both came up short. In early June, then, Savannakhet Unit got the order to orchestrate the town's recapture. Named Operation Black Lion, it called for GM 32, resting since 30 April, to be heli-lifted on 15 June into abandoned PS 47, 11 kilometres north of Khong Sedone. GM 33, retraining at Whiskey-3 since Strength II, would join the next day, hitting south and securing the crest of Phou Khong, which overlooked the town from the west.

As scheduled, GM 32 flew down to PS 18 on 15 June and boarded eight Knives. Using two-ship elements, the CH-53s shuttled into PS 47. Within two hours, the regiment began sweeping south. After moving fewer than two kilometres, however, the irregulars made heavy contact. Only after tactical airpower arrived on the scene did the PAVN troops recede to the south.

The next day, GM 33 was inserted without incident into the low hills seven kilometres west of PS 47. There the regiment split in half, with both columns hitting resistance that kept them bogged down for a week.

Lieutenant Colonel Ting Davong (second from left), the GM 41 commander and his GM cadre after consolidating their hold over Saravane, October 1972. To boost morale among his staff, Ting dyed their uniforms black and printed triangular insignia (worn over the left breast of the officer on left and third from left) touting their Saravane victory. (Photo courtesy Chris Tovar)

For its part, GM 32 by 17 June had managed to get within six kilometres north of Khong Sedone. Two days later, half of the regiment covered that final stretch. PAVN, it found, had already withdrawn west from the town.

Satisfied with its gains to date, GM 32 resisted pursuing the Vietnamese through early July. While this allowed PAVN to consolidate in peace, communication intercepts in mid-July revealed that the 39th Regiment, in a rare departure from PAVN's usual opposition to defending exposed positions, was under strict orders to retain its holdings outside Khong Sedone at all costs.

Given this unusual opportunity to inflict maximum casualties on the North Vietnamese static defenders, the two GMs, supported by heavy weapons and RLAF T-28s, began pounding the 39th Regiment. PAVN finally submitted on 18 July, limping northeast to lick its wounds.

Even though the PAVN 39 Regiment had been routed at Khong Sedone, its sacrifice had not been without effect. Two Savannakhet irregular regiments had been fully diverted for two months. This, plus the fact that MR 4's own irregular regiments (again) were in retraining and the region's FAR-Neutralist contingent was clinging to the Mekong valley, meant that Vietnam's hold on the Bolovens was left unchallenged.

Left alone to guard against further PAVN inroads toward Pakse was Task Force Phasouk. The Thai, however, were hardly up to the task: as of early June, they had been reduced to only FSB Lightning near the Route 13-23 junction. Building on this minimal foothold, Unity began to augment its MR 4 presence through June and July. First, five battalions previously in MR 2 were diverted south. And during the first week of July, artillery personnel and a 4.2-inch mortar were sent from MR 2, forming FSB Tiger (a call-sign previously used at Long Tieng) near Lightning.

With this bolstered task force, the Thai during July headed down Route 23 toward Laongam. When the PAVN 9th Regiment gave no ground, another Unity battalion and firebase were added to the effort.

With these augmentations, Phasouk restarted its advance. Some early progress was made as the Unity troops finally retook Laongam on 5 September. At that point, however, the 9th Regiment caught its second wind, resulting in bloody seesaw skirmishes through October. In the end, the frontline barely shifted. With the monsoons all but over, Phasouk had little to show for its rainy season efforts.

While Unity was battling along Route 23, MR 4's entire complement of irregular GMs was undergoing retraining at PS 18 and Phitscamp. By early October, GMs 41 and 42 had graduated and were earmarked for a retake of Saravane. Named Operation Black Lion III, the plan – part of an RLG land-grab to take back politically important areas before an anticipated ceasefire – was to begin with GM 42 lifted near the Saravane airfield; GM 41 would follow a few days afterward.

To kick off the operation, an Air America Twin Otter on the night of 18 October conducted a low-level parachute insertion of an MR 4 Commando Raider pathfinder team. Early the following morning, eight CH-53 Knives converged on PS 18. There they onloaded two battalions, the GM 42 leadership, GM 42 advisor John "Thanh Mak" Peterson, and GM 41 advisor Leon "Khamsing" Williamson.

Against no opposition, this contingent was landed in the paddies off the western side of the Saravane airstrip. Returning to PS 18, the Knife fleet onloaded a second wave from GM 42. Heading back to Saravane, the lead CH-53 descended toward the runway. Seconds away from landing, heavy-automatic weapons began to pelt the aircraft and the landing zone. As the Knives took heavy battle damage, the USAF was forced to cancel further participation in the airlift.

Fearing that communist pressure would increase later in the day, Pakse Unit ordered a third troop shuttle coupled with an evacuation of the two case officers, the GM 42 commander, and some wounded soldiers. RLAF choppers handled the infiltration, while four Air America H-34s vectored toward the Saravane runway for the evacuation. One of the latter, flown by Thai pilot Boonrat Comintra, had just onloaded Peterson and the GM 42 commander when the runway began taking heavy mortar fire. As it was taking off, machinegun rounds hit the fuselage and a rocket hit the tail. The chopper dropped like a rock off the north side of the runway.

Seeing Boonrat's ship settle in flames, another Air America H-34 rushed in for a rescue. Survivors, including the GM 42 commander, were carried back to PS 18. An irregular company later secured the wreck and removed the burned corpse of Peterson.

Two days later, the remainder of GM 41 was lifted by choppers and Air America Twin Otters to the Saravane runway. Proving cooperative, PAVN faded east without a fight. At the cost of one CIA case officer, Black Lion III had met its objective.

Eleventh Hour

By the closing days of September 1972, Long Tieng Unit's grand Phou Phiang II plans lay in ruins. Of the operation's five prongs, Delta had been crushed, while Alpha, Bravo and Echo were little more than a minor irritant to PAVN's hold over the PDJ. Task Force

Charlie alone had just started to show promise when Ray Seaborg was killed, prompting GMs 15 and 23 to flee the southern plain.

In testimony to the resilience of the irregulars, the guerrillas of Charlie continued to spar with PAVN over the course of October. Not giving up, Vang Pao also committed Phou Phiang's final element – Task Force Foxtrot consisting of GM 28, fresh from Nam Pung Dam – which staged from Bouamlong for guerrilla operations north of the Ban Ban valley.

Heartened by what he saw as a whiff of momentum, Vang Pao began planning for a new offensive in which government forces would seize a line from the southern PDJ down to Xieng Khouangville. Set to start on 1 November, Savannakhet Unit on 22 October offered GM 32 – rested after its Khong Sedone victory – to reinforce Task Force Charlie. Within three days, the entire regiment was choppered by Knives to the Lat Sen vicinity and from there immediately ordered to capture Phou Theung and Finger Ridge, the old FSB Mustang location. As it manoeuvred, PAVN responded with a tank-led column. Overrunning the GM 32 positions during the pre-dawn hours of 26 October, the Vietnamese killed the GM commander with a tank round. By 0530 hours, GM 32 was in full retreat off the plain; when it regrouped five days later, it counted 140 dead, 53 missing and 190 wounded.

During the same night, other fronts began to collapse. Both Unity battalions in the vicinity of Lat Sen were smashed, while GM 30 began deserting in droves. Even GM 30 commander Chanh Nosavan, seething over what he felt was misuse at the hands of the Hmong, left the regiment and headed to Vientiane; he subsequently quit the SGU program.

Although PAVN had fully reclaimed the initiative, Vang Pao on 1 November ordered yet another assault on the southern PDJ. The troops had barely moved past Khang Kho when PAVN, one day later, launched its earliest dry season campaign to date. Bearing the brunt was GM 32, which was declared combat ineffective by its case officer, Sword and subsequently returned to MR 3.

Equally hard hit, GM 23 dispersed across the southern plain. Overflying the regiment in an attempt to bring order back to the unit, case officer Bill "Hambone" Watkins took a rifle round to his calf and was evacuated for medical treatment. GM 15, clinging to Khang Kho, abandoned the site on 13–14 November and was lifted back to Nam Yu.

Elsewhere around the PDJ good news was hard to find. Task Force Bravo tried dividing its attention – with GM 21 moving toward Ban Na, and GM 22 hovering northwest of Phou Seu – but neither column made any progress. Northeast of the plain, Task Force Echo – augmented once again by GM 24 – was being successfully countered by two freshly-arrived PAVN battalions. Task Force Foxtrot, which by 30 October had managed to edge into the northern Ban Ban valley, was immediately checked. Finally, painfully, Phou Phiang II drew to an end.

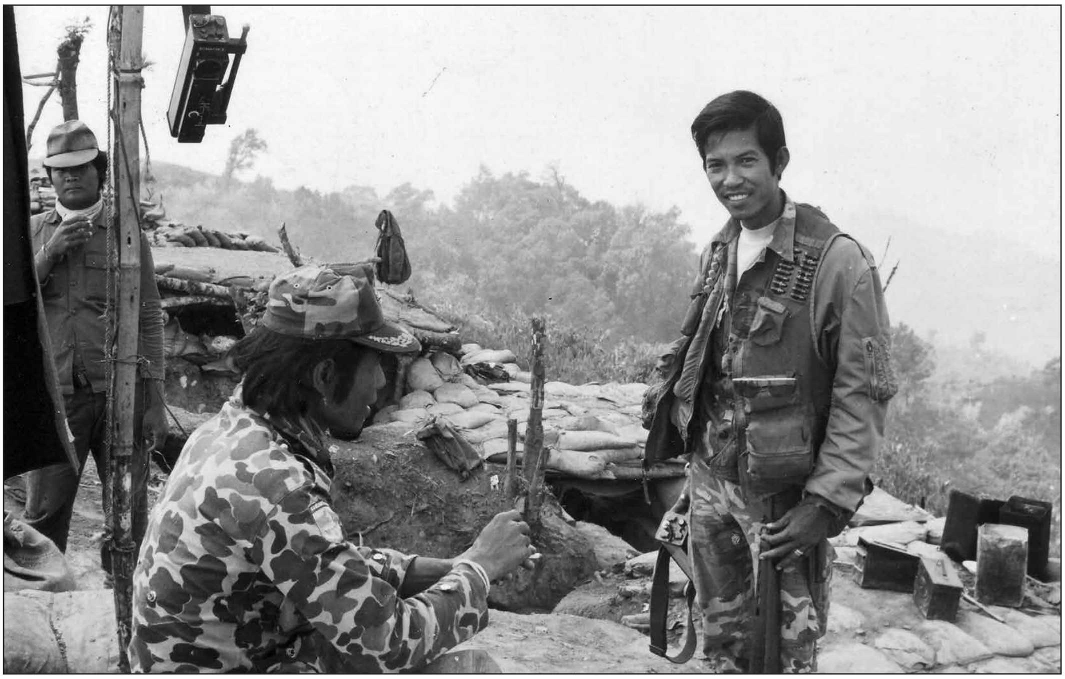
With the Hmong having been bled white and the GMs from MRs 1 and 3 already sent home, the defence of MR 2 leaned all the more on Task Force Vang Pao. To boost Thai capabilities, four new battalions arrived at Long Tieng during the third week of November. Shortly thereafter, following the example set by Task Force Phasouk, three Unity *groupements mobiles* – GMs 201, 202 and 203 – were established at Long Tieng. Flexibly configured to suit operational requirements, each regiment was composed of a 21-man GM headquarters, three or four infantry battalions, and a heavy-weapons company.

With this reconfigured force, Unity staged drives against Tha Tham Bleung and Phou Phasai. Against the first target, Air America CH-47 Chinooks on 6 December lifted Thai troops directly into the Tha Tham Bleung valley. Against the second target, Unity soldiers, backed by GMs 21 and 26, pressed toward Phou Phasai from the southeast and southwest. In both cases, numerically inferior PAVN defenders successfully countered their advances.

As 1972 drew to a close, fighting southwest of the PDJ dropped off. On the last day of the year, however, four Pathet Lao battalions pushed west along Route 7 and began pressuring FAR elements around the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. Dropping their equipment, the FAR troops fled south along Route 13.

To reopen the road link between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, the FAR General Staff within days finalised plans for a double-pronged sweep of Route 13. Named Maharat II, the operation called for a FAR brigade to be lifted north of Sala Phou Khoun, while five MR 5 battalions would manoeuvre out of Vang Vieng for a linkup. Joining the southern task force, too, were a pair of M24 tanks and three towed 155mm howitzers.

The strategic crossroads at Sala Phou Khoun was captured by communist forces on 30 December 1972. Pathet Lao units then pressed south and hit Moung Kassy with PT-76 tanks on 12 January 1973. Thai Unity battalions, rushed to Moung Kassy, destroyed two of the tanks with LAW rockets and M-79 grenade launchers. Squatting on top of one tank is Thai FAG Popcorn; standing in front in tiger-stripe camouflage is Thai FAG Spotlight. (Photo courtesy Veera Star)



Thai FAG Bullethead (right) with an MR 5 FAR soldier at Moung Kassy, January 1973. (Photo courtesy Veera Star)

GM 31 case officer Jim "Indian" Barber and Unity case officer "Big Red" (with beard) observe a destroyed Pathet Lao GAZ-69 light truck at Sala Phou Khoun, 31 January 1972. GM 31 performed a heliborne assault into Sala Phou Khoun on 19 January; Unity reinforcements arrived at month's end. (Photo courtesy Mike Ingham)

Once the Maharat II columns were given the order to advance, the northern task force barely moved from its starting blocks. The southern battalions, too, were stalled by 8 January.

To reinforce the southern prong, Task Force Vang Pao was solicited for help. Between 9 and 10 January, three Thai battalions were dispatched to defensive positions along Route 13. Two days after their arrival, a pair of Pathet Lao PT-76s were spotted heading south. As the first tank approached Moung Kassy, it got into a long-distance cannon duel with the FAR M24s. When the second PT-76 arrived, Thai troops disabled it with a LAW rocket. The first enemy tank then reversed direction, only to be stopped by Thai M79 grenadiers.

Although the attack on Moung Kassy had been repulsed, Maharat II's southern FAR column refused to make headway. The northern column was also dragging its feet. At that point, Savannakhet Unit was ordered to conduct an air assault with GM 31. To secure a landing zone for the regiment, a 12-man MR 3 airborne pathfinder team was loaded into an Air America Twin Otter on the night of 19 January and dropped over the road junction. The next morning the 1,166-strong GM 31 was shuttled up to Vang Vieng. There the regiment's case officer, the former Commando Raider advisor Jim "Indian" Barber, loaded one-third of the GM into seven Knives and two Air America Chinooks. Flying north, the armada descended into the commando-held landing zone. The regiment was able to assemble unopposed and, over the next four days, slowly walked to the road intersection. The Pathet Lao, they found, had already melted into the surrounding hills.

With Route 13 cleared by month's end, Task Force Vang Pao on 31 January dispatched three battalions – together constituting GM 203 – to defend the road junction, enabling GM 31 two days later to return to MR 3. On 5 February, GM 203 was augmented by a new Unity firebase at Sala Phou Khoun, FSB Goldfinger. In a demonstration of their determination to hold the junction, RTA General Paitoon Inkatanawat flew up to the site and personally oversaw the Unity firebase for a full three months.

Phou Phiang III

By mid-January 1973, hints of an imminent Laos ceasefire were stronger than ever. For Vang Pao, this was not comforting as it meant that the PDJ, easily defended by PAVN through the last monsoons, would be legally under communist control, as would the key hills between the plain and Long Tieng. Worse, since mid-December Bouamlong had come under the heaviest PAVN attack to date.

With Bouamlong's plight in mind, Long Tieng Unit in mid-January devised a limited dry season offensive to divert PAVN attention from northeast of the PDJ. The operation, named Phou Phiang III, involved three columns. From the vicinity of Ban Na, Task Force Bravo, composed of GM 22 with reinforcements from GM 26, was to move east. From Padong, Task Force Charlie – pairing GMs 23 and 28 – would go northeast toward Xieng Khouangville. Last, Task Force Alpha was planned as an all-Unity pincer to retake Moung Soui, held by two battalions from the 148th Regiment.

In November 1972, Air America took delivery of eight CH-47C Chinook heavy lift helicopters. The colour scheme was olive drab with no identification markings other than the aircraft number on the rotor pylons. Here two have landed at Xieng Lom. (photo courtesy Veera Star)

On 18 January, Task Forces Bravo and Charlie began movement toward the PDJ. Both showed initial progress as Bravo hooked south and came within six kilometres of the western edge of the plain, while Charlie closed to within seven kilometres south of Xieng Khouangville. Neither would get any closer over the weeks ahead.

For the Task Force Alpha pincer, an MR 2 Commando Raider team was lifted to the low ground eight kilometres southeast of Moung Soui. Two Thai battalions were then packed inside Air America Chinooks at Sam Thong and ferried north to the commando-secured landing zone. For the other half of Alpha's pincer, Hmong Commando Raiders were inserted by S-58Ts during the early morning hours of 3 February into the hills eight kilometres northeast of Moung Soui. Thirty minutes later, Chinooks arrived from Sam Thong and unloaded another Thai battalion. By the next day, they were joined by yet another battalion and 18 men from the GM 201 headquarters.

With four battalions in place, Task Force Alpha was set to link up within Moung Soui in four days' time. The southern column, however, quickly bogged down in the swampy lowlands. Experiencing considerable problems, too, were the two northern battalions, mainly centred around the poor discipline of the Thai volunteers.

By the planned linkup date, the two Alpha columns had barely moved from their landing zones. To discuss the stalled operation, the GM 201 commander was recalled for an evening conference at Long Tieng. That same night, the Vietnamese used 130mm artillery to scatter the northern battalions. Without ever coming close to capturing Moung Soui, the Unity troops were pulled back to Sam Thong in March and Phou Phiang III fizzled to an undignified end.

The Fall of Nam Yu

Elsewhere in northern Laos, a placid status quo had emerged in FG/NW, with the RLG holding a string of guerrilla camps, the communists retaining control over Nam Tha and a handful of other villages, and the remaining countryside not held strongly by either side.

During the last week of November 1972 – perhaps with one eye on an imminent ceasefire – this status quo was shattered when the Pathet Lao attacked and occupied four government outposts, the most significant of which was the long-time Lao Theung guerrilla garrison at Vien Pou Kha. Coincidentally, GM 15 had just been repatriated to Nam Yu after two months of service in MR 2. Although it had lost its case officer – Ray Seaborg – the regiment had not taken excessive casualties. Ordered to retake Vien Pou Kha, they were loaded into choppers and shuttled east, easily reoccupying the site.

Returning to Nam Yu in early January 1973, GM 15 was allowed a much-deserved rest. Just as its troops began their leave, however, resurgent communist forces pushed back into Vien Pou Kha. Eager to retake that town, Nam Yu put out a call for available units. Most of the zone's forces, however, were tied down in static defence of other guerrilla garrisons. A new regiment, GM 16, was taking shape at Nam Yu, but was still in its formative stage.

There being no alternative, GM 15 landed the assignment. As ordered, the regiment's officer cadre was rounded up for brief refresher training, while a call went out for the rest of the men to cut short their breaks and return to Nam Yu. Before GM 15 had a chance to reassemble, however, there were signs during the last week of January of an increased communist presence in the hills surrounding Nam Yu. On 1 February, this suspected threat was dramatically revealed when Pathet Lao soldiers overran and razed Nam Thouei, a USAID site four kilometres to the east.

With Nam Thouei in flames, it was a good guess that Nam Yu was next. As Nam Yu's case officers spent the afternoon of 2 February burning documents and removing bolts from the 1,600 M16 rifles stockpiled at the site's arms depot, a plea for reinforcements went out to Task Force Rathikoun. It heeded the call, and at 1700 hours an Air America C-123 from Xieng Lom began shuttles to the Nam Yu runway. Aboard were Unity infantry, mortars and 75mm recoilless rifles.

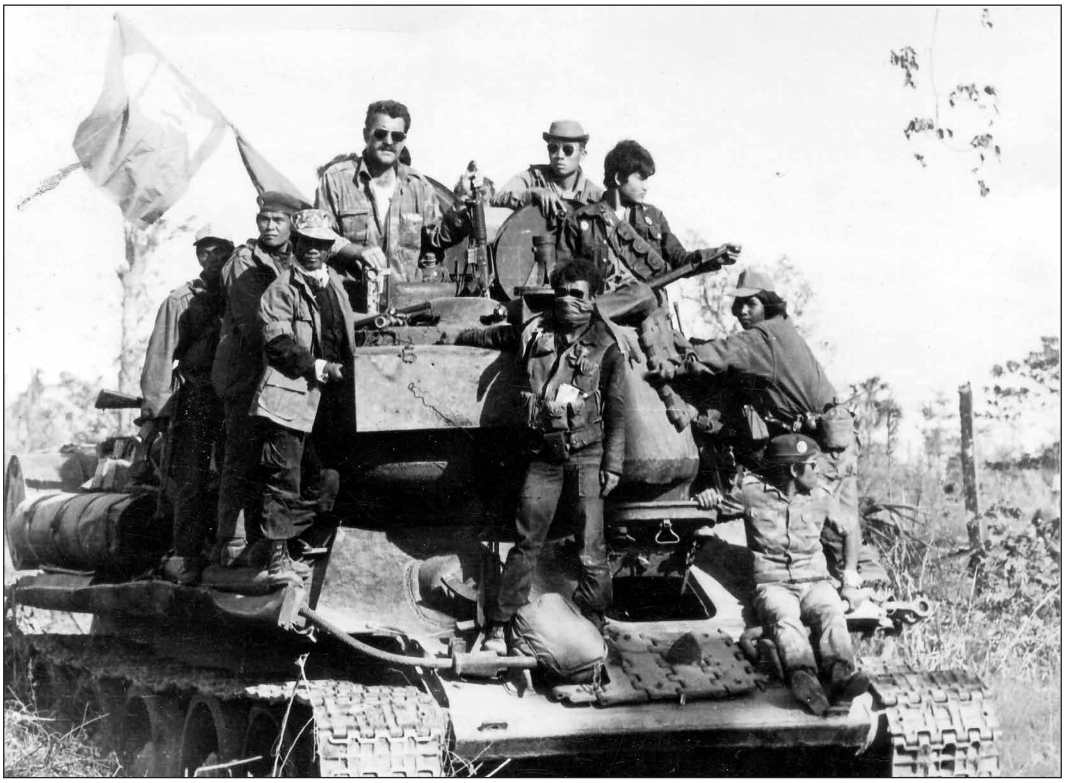
By last light – as all remaining CIA officers departed for Ban Houei Sai – a reinforced Unity company had established defensive positions around the airstrip, while a Thai mortar and recoilless rifle crew had positioned itself atop a karst outcropping on the southern edge of the valley. Two hours later, sporadic mortar rounds began to land in the Nam Yu valley. A series of probes followed, sparking firefights through the night that consumed most of the ammunition carried by the Unity troops.

At first light on 3 February, the Pathet Lao increased pressure from the north, while a small number of communists stormed the karst outcropping near the CIA compound, forcing off the Thai and capturing an 81mm mortar and a 75mm recoilless rifle. From this high ground, the Pathet Lao then put the Nam Yu runway under fire. By 1000 hours, the Thai defenders were steadily losing ground. USAF jets and RLAF T-28s, attempting to silence the captured heavy-weapons position atop the karst, failed to neutralise the communist gunners. Ammunition nearly exhausted, the ranking Unity officer ordered a retreat toward the Mekong.

Before departing, all heavy weapons were thermited and T-28s demolished the site's warehouse. The case officers formerly at Nam Yu, now relocated to the riverside town of Ban Houei Sai, were left counting the days to a ceasefire.

On the Home Front

Ever since the exhausting Phoutah struggle along Route 9, MR 3 had been spared the worst of the war. That changed in the fall of 1972, when the PAVN 29th Regiment pushed west to Dong Hene. From there, a battalion headed south on the night of 27 October, driving the resident FAR garrison from Kengkok without a fight. In an uncharacteristic fit of barbarity, the North Vietnamese attackers took two female Christian missionaries – both Americans – and burned them alive; two other missionaries – American Samuel Mattix and Canadian Lloyd Oppel – were bundled off to prison in North Vietnam.



GMs 30, 31 and 32 staged a coordinated attack around Moung Phalane in November 1972, routing the PAVN 29th Regiment. Members of GM 30 and their case officer, Lyle "Bear" Brown, pose atop a PAVN Soviet-made T-34 medium tank captured at that town. (Photo courtesy Lyle Brown)

Close as Kengkok was to Savannakhet, its loss was something the RLG could not abide. Savannakhet Unit was handed the task for its recapture and by the morning of 28 October had assembled GM 31 and BG 311 (one of GM 34's reserve units). Trucked along Route 13, the force dismounted for a 10-kilometre hike from the southwest. On their third try, the Lao cleared the town; PAVN had already fled the previous night.

At the same time, GM 30, back just two days since its undignified collapse in MR 2, was trucked to Kengkok. From there, CIA case officer Lyle "Bear" Brown – an ex-smoke jumper who had replaced Supermex as GM 30's advisor that summer – ordered the regiment toward PAVN-held Dong Hene. GM 31 and BG 311 were set to follow in the same general direction.

After just one day, GM 31 ran into Vietnamese resistance and then spent half of November moving at a glacial pace. GM 30, by contrast, moved north without opposition, reaching Route 9 and taking Dong Hene on 14 November against moderate resistance. Most of the PAVN defenders had withdrawn east along Route 9 to the next village.

By that time, GM 32 had returned with heavy casualties from MR 2. Forgoing a refitting, the regiment was immediately dispatched along Route 9, pushing past GM 30's forward line and heading toward Moung Phalane. Initially, resistance was nil; indeed, PAVN troops had abandoned tons of ammunition in a hasty retreat. But on 25 November, as GM 32 arrived at the gates of Moung Phalane, Vietnamese resistance increased sharply. After 12 days of skirmishing – and with strong heavy-weapons support – the regiment was able to consolidate control of the airfield.

Ten kilometres south of Route 9, GM 30 pushed east along a parallel course. Against almost no PAVN resistance, the regiment approached to within four kilometres south of Moung Phalane. Meanwhile, GM 31, which had been skirmishing near Kengkok, on 22 November was heli-lifted nine kilometres northeast of Moung Phalane. While GM 31 pushed southwest for a linkup with GM 32, GM 30 formed a blocking force on Route 9, 15 kilometres east of Moung Phalane.

Confronted by these three Lao regiments, PAVN broke and ran. In the resulting windfall of captured equipment, the haul for the MR 3 irregulars included a T-34 tank and an 85mm field gun. GMs 31 and 30 remained there until near year's end, after which they were pulled back for a rest.

Back at Moung Phalane, GM 32 took control of the sector in January 1973. With an eye on the clock, PAVN tanks, artillery and infantry hit them on the night of 6 February, ejecting the Lao regiment from the town proper.

As GM 32 was being driven from Moung Phalane, GM 30 was recalled from its leave and rushed east as reinforcement. Together, GMs 30 and 32 tried to retake the town. PAVN, however, withstood the punishment; by the 22 February ceasefire date, Moung Phalane was still in communist hands.

The Battle for Thakhek

Farther north in the panhandle, RLG and communist forces had long kept to a three-way status quo: FAR holding tight to the Mekong valley; PAVN retaining iron-fisted control over the Trail network leading south from the Nape Pass onto the Nakay Plateau; and the Pathet Lao, by virtue of indifference from the other two, being allowed a weak grip over the mountains in northern Khammouane and eastern Borikhane Provinces.

Over the course of 1972, this balance was upended as the communist began to encroach across Khammouane. By the second week of November, North Vietnamese troops were closing in on the Mekong, with one element hitting the vicinity between Paksane and the Nam Kading River, and the other probing Thakhek.

Initially, FAR attempted to take on the approaching PAVN columns by itself. FAR, however, quickly proved unable to check the Vietnamese advance. As had happened so often in the past, Savannakhet Unit got an emergency request for help. Since no full-size irregular regiments were available, the two-battalion GM 34 was lifted to Thakhek on 17 November.

Moving six kilometres southeast along Route 13, the GM was able to hold the frontline for a month. On 22 December, however, PAVN infantry and tanks struck 40 kilometres south of Thakhek, capturing a key bridge spanning the Se Bang Fai.

Five days later, GM 34 was ordered to retake the bridge. Moving down Route 13, the Lao irregulars clashed with PAVN elements. Instead of making a strong stand, however, the Vietnamese destroyed the bridge on 28 December, then fled. Because PAVN battalions were still roaming the vicinity, GM 34 on 5 January was ordered to sweep toward Thakhek.

By 6 February GM 31, back from its successful Sala Phou Khoun outing, was ordered to reinforce the Thakhek sector. That day, the regiment was choppered north from Nong Saphong. Linking up with GM 34, the two regiments manned the town's outer defences through the 22 February ceasefire.

Black Lion V

Midway between Khong Sedone and Saravane, the town of Lao Ngam (not to be confused with Laongam on Route 23) was identified in October 1972 as a major PAVN trans-shipment point. To disrupt this activity, Savannakhet Unit offered use of GM 33. Preceding the regiment, a 50-man MR 4 Commando Raider unit was parachuted by Twin Otters during the evening of 23 October into a field six kilometres northwest of the target.

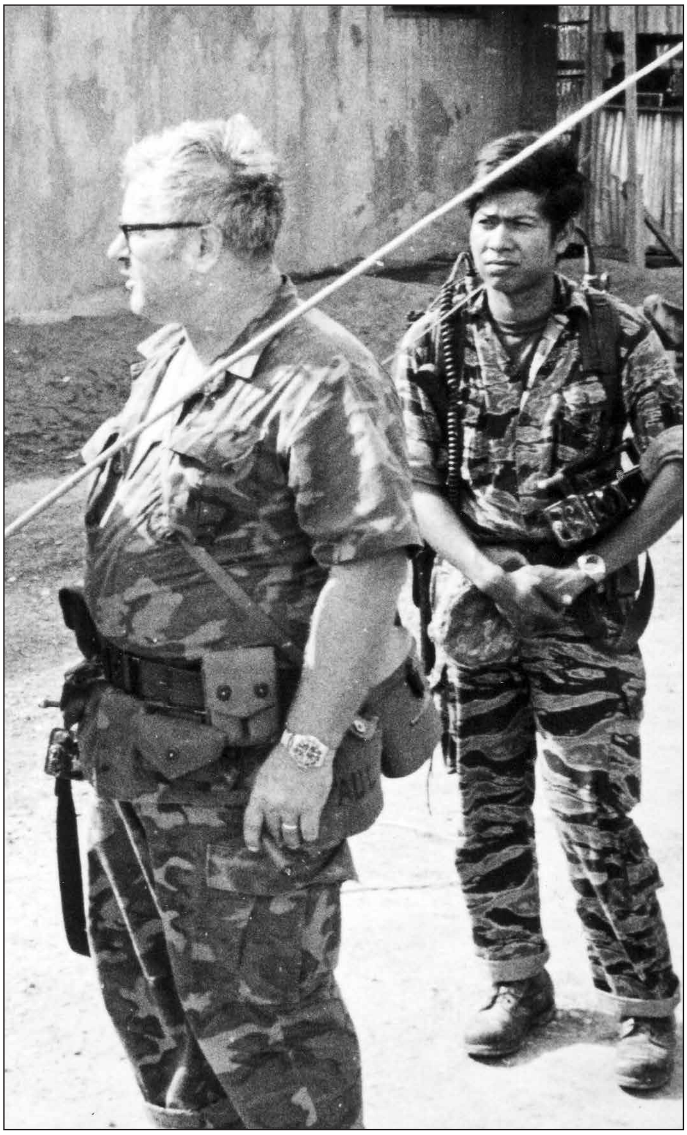
The next morning, GM 33, accompanied by CIA advisor John "Supercharger" Conley, was heli-lifted by Knives to the secured landing zone without incident. Three days later, the regiment took an empty Lao Ngam, then prepared to conduct sweeps through the surrounding area. Using M19 mines, the Lao troops were able to destroy three tanks as they worked their way through the lowlands south of the town for the next 25 days.

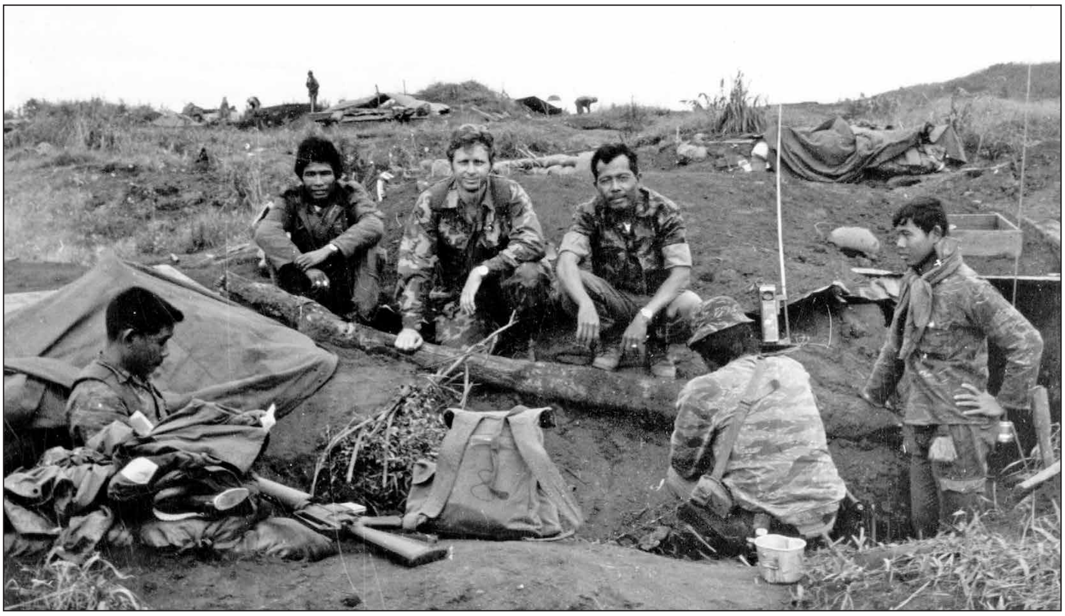
Unity case officer Mike "Hardnose" Ingham with the Task Force Phasouk commander, Special Colonel Wanchai "Sawn" Ruangtrakun (seated, right), 1972. Ingham is wearing the Project Unity shoulder insignia. (Photo courtesy Mike Ingham)

While PAVN lost ground near Lao Ngam, the 9th Regiment was holding fast along Route 23. Beginning in late October, Task Force Phasouk spent nearly a month hitting Vietnamese troops at Laongam; each time they were thrown back. On 17 November, the Thai once more rushed Laongam; again, the North Vietnamese did not budge. That evening, with all other battalions having come up short, the recently arrived BC 627 was brought to the frontline. To the surprise of case officers, the untested Unity battalion pushed through Laongam by the following morning.

With the Thai inching their way back onto the Bolovens, GM 33 on 21 November received orders to walk southeast from Lao Ngam and secure Houei Sai, the original Unity outpost in MR 4. Once there, the Lao regiment would be joined by Unity's GM 401. With the combined GM 33/Unity troops pressing down Route 23 from the northeast, the rest of Task Force Phasouk would continue its road-bound drive past Laongam. With the two columns set to converge on Paksong, the operation to liberate the latter town was named Black Lion V.

By 26 November, GM 33 easily moved into Houei Sai. The following day, GM 401 was loaded into Knives and lifted into a GM 33-held landing zone four kilometres northwest of the village.


Paul "Electric" Payne, Unity advisor to Task Force Phasouk in MR 4 during 1972. (Photo courtesy Paul Payne)



On 5 December 1973, GM 33 and Thai GM 401 pushed their way into the Bolovens town of Paksong during Operation Black Lion V. Here Unity case officer John "Lone Star" Kearns pauses inside Paksong on 14 December with Thai FAG Sky King (left) and a BC 614A company commander. The next day PAVN fired an 85mm round into their midst, killing eight including Kearns. (Photo courtesy Veera Star)

GM 42 case officer Jim "Panya" Veitch with MR 4 guerrillas loading into a CH-53 prior to insertion near Saravane. In the last major battle in MR 4, GMs 41, 42 and 43 managed to regain partial control of Saravane at the opening of February 1973 – only to be thrown back by a tank-led PAVN assault before the 22 February ceasefire. (Photo courtesy Bob Wnukowski)

From there, the Thai followed the Nam Houei Set southwest; GM 33 took a parallel course on their eastern flank. By 5 December, the combined Thai and Savannakhet troops arrived on the outskirts of Paksong. Against little opposition, they walked into the bombed-out town, declaring it secure by the following day.

Subject to light probes, GM 401 on 15 December was deployed along a defensive triangle around the town. That same day, the new Task Force Phasouk commander came for an orientation tour of the Paksong front. Landing in the town, he was receiving a briefing from his field commanders when a PAVN 85mm round landed in their midst. Eight persons were killed, including the GM 401 deputy commander, the BC 613A commander, and Unity case officer John "Lone Star" Kearns.

Elsewhere in MR 4, PAVN pressure on Saravane ratcheted upward during November 1972. This coincided with the arrival of the 9th Regiment, which had vacated its positions along Route 23 in the face of the Black Lion V columns. By 8 December, the Vietnamese moved in for a combined infantry/heavy-weapons assault; the GM 41 headquarters took a direct 122mm hit, which killed nearly everybody except the highly rated regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ting Davong.

Still, the MR 4 troops held. As pressure built on GMs 41 and 42, Pakse Unit devised plans to seize Thateng to the south, thereby blocking PAVN supplies from reaching either Saravane or Paksong. Handed the assignment was GM 43, fresh from a refitting at PS 18. Under the new command of the one-eyed Major Noukhoune Bounthisan, the regiment took the town without resistance.

Despite the heliborne insertion of GM 43, the defenders at Saravane were given no reprieve. On the night of 15 December, an estimated 3,200 PAVN rounds dropped on the town, followed by ground assaults from nearly all directions. Intermittently pummelled for several more weeks, the two MR 4 irregular regiments held through 9 January 1973 before beginning to edge westward. As emergency reinforcements, GM 43 received orders to walk north from Thateng. Filling the resulting void in Thateng would be GM 33, which on 12 January was ordered to move overland from the Paksong sector. The Savannakhet regiment arrived the following day, allowing the Pakse irregulars to rush north toward Saravane.

As GM 43 circled counter-clockwise and prepared to move into Saravane from the east, GMs 41 and 42 moved forward from the west. Although the three regiments were able to regain partial control over the town during the first few days of February, PAVN forces returned with tanks. The outgunned Lao wilted, fleeing the length of Route 16 and arriving near Khong Sedone by the time of the ceasefire.

While the Saravane front grew critical during January, Paksong by contrast remained quiet. There, Task Force Phasouk had ringed the town with five battalions, while two more battalions and a firebase (FSB Leopard) were strung along Route 23.

The Paksong peace was not to last. By early February, with Saravane back in its hands and a ceasefire imminent, two battalions from the PAVN 9th Regiment shifted south toward Paksong. On 7 February, they reached the high ground seven kilometres to the northeast. Panicking, Unity troops east and southeast of Paksong withdrew into the town. With reports of PAVN tanks approaching and General Soutchay declaring a regionwide tactical emergency, the Thai by dusk had exited Paksong and established a new frontline alongside FSB Leopard.

The following day, Task Force Phasouk made a quick attempt to retake Paksong; it failed. To help the task force, GM 33 on 9 February was told to move down from Thateng. Three days later, the Savannakhet troops surprised PAVN and moved back into Paksong against little opposition.

For nearly two weeks, GM 33 – with heavy tactical air support – held their ground. On the night of 21 February, Paksong remained under firm RLG control as the ceasefire was set for the following noon. Believing that they had bested their opponent, GM 33's troops were in high spirits; celebrations of the impending peace lasted well into the night. Along Route 23, the mood among Unity soldiers was less festive; believing themselves to be unemployed following the ceasefire, few of the Thai found reason to cheer.

The next morning, the final hours before the ceasefire went by without incident. Fifteen minutes before noon, however, communist forces launched an artillery blitz against the GM 33 line. By 1205 hours, the Savannakhet regiment was on the run, streaming past the forward Unity battalions and regrouping near Ban Phakkout. The Thai tried to edge forward, establishing a new front line at Ban Houayman. By nightfall, PAVN had consolidated their grip over Paksong and hoisted a Pathet Lao flag in victory over the levelled prize.

Commando Raiders with training officer Thomas "Shep" Johnson at PS 44, fall 1972. Two of the best (standing, third from left; kneeling, second from right) were chosen to conduct the top-secret wiretap operation at Vinh in North Vietnam on 6/7 December 1972. (Photo courtesy Thomas Johnson)

MR 1 case officer Hugh "Greensleeves" Murray and Colonel Thongphanh Sukhaseum, commander of guerrilla forces in eastern MR 1, with a captured Soviet-made 122mm rocket northeast of Luang Prabang, November 1972. (photo courtesy Hugh Murray)

Special Projects

While the CIA paramilitary campaign in Laos was largely a covert operation – in other words, it merely had to have a veneer of deniability – the Agency occasionally used its Lao paramilitary assets to conduct top-secret clandestine missions. Some of the most sensitive of these were run late in the war out of PS 44 in MR 4. There, 20 Commando Raiders were retained as a kingdom-wide elite reaction team. The base also housed specially-equipped aircraft for discrete infiltrations.

During December 1972, a team of these commandos, flying aboard a heavily-modified Hughes 500P chopper with muffled engines and extra rotor blades, succeeded in placing a telephone tap on phone lines near the North Vietnamese town of Vinh.

Coming off this success, beginning in late January 1973 the CIA's Special Projects base at PS 44 started rehearsing another tap mission, this one on the road leading to the Pathet Lao headquarters in Sam Neua. Repeated attempts to place both the tap and a relay device took place during March 1973, but all came up short. After intensive rehearsals at PS 44 during November and early December 1973, an Air America S-58T Twin-Pac successfully deployed the relay on the night of 17 December, at long last enabling the CIA to begin recording Pathet Lao phone traffic out of Sam Neua.

9

INTEGRATION

In MR 3, the preponderance of guerrilla assets was being funnelled into the GMs. However, Savannakhet Unit still had a wide range of road-watchers and action teams on the books. In addition, there were remnants of the Commando Raiders program, minus those that had been converted into airborne pathfinders for the GMs.

CIA advisor John Conley, who arrived in 1972 to take over these small-unit guerrillas, found the program rife with neglect. For one thing, Air America and USAF helicopter pilots, mindful of the deadly array of anti-aircraft weapons along the eastern side of the panhandle, would only agree to insert teams a considerable distance from the Trail. This meant the guerrillas would be seriously exposed while walking toward their targets.

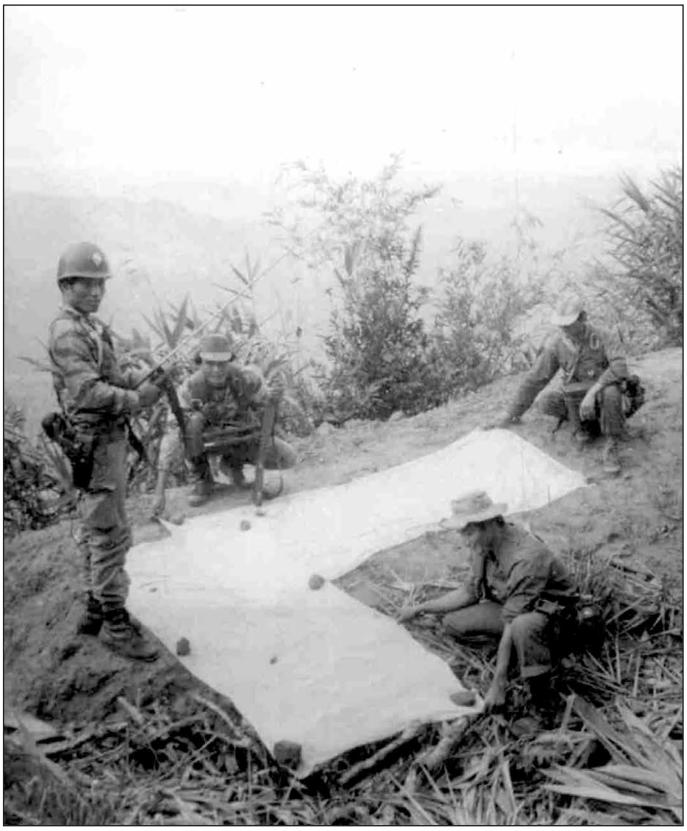
For another thing, the team members were being paid a daily per diem – regardless of results. Enterprising guerrillas were thus motivated to hold up in a cave out of harm's way and radio back bogus intelligence – and to stay there as long as possible in order to build up pay.

Realising changes had to be made, Conley gathered all available team members – Commando Raiders and otherwise – and had them turn in their weapons. Only a select few were to be retained, he announced; the rest were given the opportunity to transfer to the GMs. A mini-mutiny briefly ensued at Whiskey-3, but the downsizing was soon finalised.

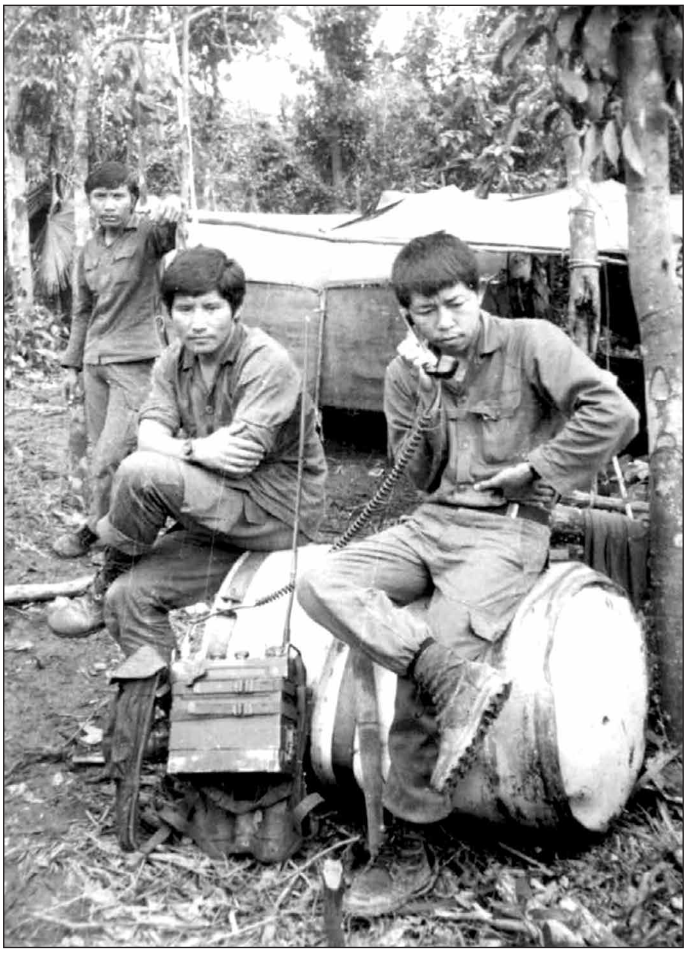
For those who remained, Conley took a page from the Pakse Unit program and implemented a cash-on-delivery renumeration system. Teams would now be offered a full month's wage for fulfilling a specific mission, regardless of how many days it took. Using this new pay structure, some of the former Commando Raiders were merged with turned PAVN prisoners and formed into three snatch teams. Wearing PAVN and Pathet Lao uniforms, these pseudo teams pretended to be communist units moving along the Trail. If and when the opportunity arose, they would grab North Vietnamese prisoners and call for an immediate extraction. The concept worked as planned on several occasions through the end of 1972.

After the Paris Peace Accords ostensibly ending the Vietnam War were signed on 27 January 1973, Savannakhet Unit was given the additional task of verifying North Vietnamese compliance. Specifically, they were to revive the road-watch concept in order to see if any PAVN traffic was moving through the border passes and down the Trail toward South Vietnam.

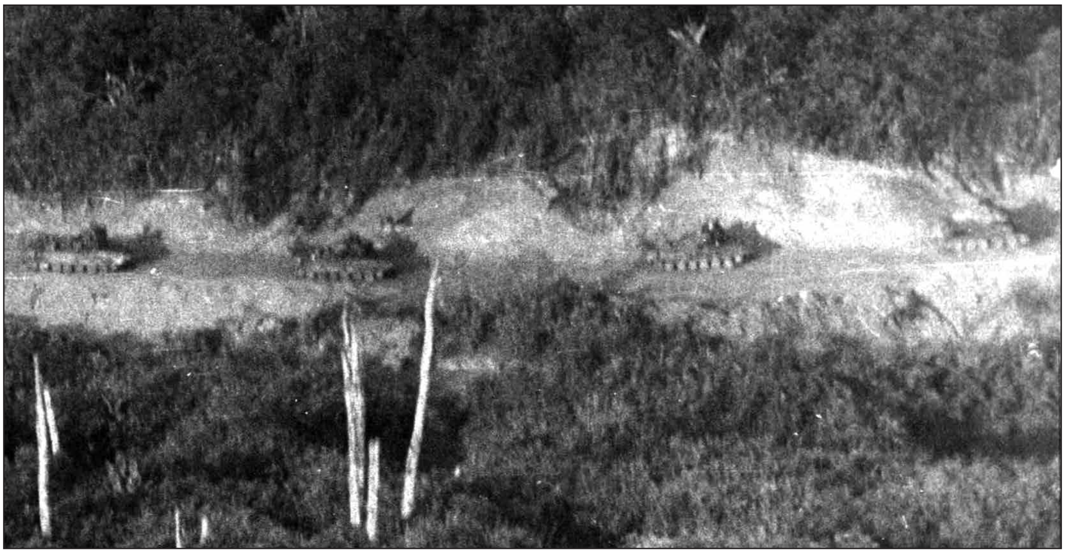
Gathering some of the best remaining guerrillas as Whiskey-3, eight of them formed a team call-signed Tameo (Lao for "Cat's Eyes"). After photo interpreters at Udorn pinpointed some karst overhangs at the Mu Gia and Ban Karai passes, Tameo was targeted toward the latter. To ensure they were positioned there as instructed, Savannakhet Unit instructed them to lay out reflective panels in the



Team Tameo (Lao for "Cat's Eye"), the last road-watch unit deployed near the Ban Karai Pass, May 1973. To verify its location, the team was ordered to lay out daily ground signals that could be seen by overflying Air America planes. (Photo courtesy John Conley)



Team Tameo, inserted by an Air America Chinook near the Ban Karai Pass, May 1973. Two members sit on a water barrel; because of the lack of water in the mountains overlooking the pass, the Chinook dropped several barrels of water to sustain the team during their deployment. (Photo courtesy John Conley)



Team Tameo photographs PAVN armour transiting the Ban Karai Pass on the way to South Vietnam in May 1973, in violation of the Paris Peace Accords. (Photo courtesy John Conley)

shape of a letter at their overwatch position, with the letter to be changed daily. An Air America Volpar would then fly overhead at irregular intervals to make sure the proper daily signal was being displayed.

There remained the problem of inserting Tameo sufficiently close to its target, thus eliminating an arduous hike through enemy territory. After much discussion, Savannakhet Unit decided on using an Air America CH-47 Chinook, eight of which had arrived in-theatre during November 1972. To minimise exposure, a single Chinook would carry Tameo close to its observation point. The eight team members were hooked with carabiners along a nylon strap, which in turn would be lowered by the Chinook's winch through the belly hatch. This negated the need for a helicopter landing zone, as the Chinook could hover just over the treetops behind the forward edge of the karst and out of view from the Trail below.

Using the Chinook for infiltrations in this manner, missions were conducted near the border during March and May 1973. At Ban Karai, Tameo was able to photograph a large number of PAVN trucks and tanks heading toward South Vietnam, thus putting the lie to Hanoi's adherence to the Paris accords.

In late June 1973, Savannakhet Unit proposed further road-watch missions of this sort. But as high-altitude aerial reconnaissance was instead directed to cover the passes, these last missions were deemed redundant and never launched.

Closing the Books

Back in October 1972 – the month formal ceasefire talks began between the RLG and Pathet Lao – U.S. and Lao officials started discussions on the future of the irregulars. Their exchange took on a sense of urgency as Pathet Lao negotiators made clear their demand that all irregulars – which had thoroughly dominated fighting on behalf of the RLG – be demobilised prior to formation of a coalition government.

As a pre-emptive first step, the CIA on 10 November 1972 implemented a sweeping name change for its paramilitary forces. From that point forward, all Lao guerrilla units – generically known as SGU – took the new name of Lao Irregular Forces (LIFs).

Next, the CIA proposed in January 1973 that in order to "legitimise" the LIFs, they gradually assume the identities of the 1st and 2nd Strike Divisions, both of which were already in the FAR order of battle. To accomplish this, all BGs in February were renamed *bataillons d'infanterie*, and LIF *groupements mobiles* were redesignated *régiments d'infanterie* (RIs). LIF regiments were then to be grouped into brigades and ostensibly placed under the two strike divisions. Since the LIF brigades would use the same brigade designators as existing FAR brigades, two sets of identically numbered strike divisions would result.

Ultimately, it was planned for the FAR brigades to be dissolved, leaving only the two LIF divisions. In the resulting bait and switch, FAR's existing 1st Strike Division would be replaced by an all-LIF 1st Strike Division under Vang Pao. Similarly, the FAR 2nd Strike Division would be replaced by the LIF 2nd Strike Division. Because the commander of the former, Brigadier General Thao Ly, had a long history with the MR 3 guerrilla program, he would continue as commander of the LIF 2nd Strike Division.

According to Vientiane Station Directive 1-13, this intentionally convoluted process was to be concluded by the end of June 1973. In compliance with the directive, all MR 1 irregulars in the spring of 1973 were regrouped as the 11th Brigade/1st Strike Division (a designator already used by a three-battalion FAR Brigade in Vientiane). Headquartered in Luang Prabang, the LIF's 11th Brigade had three regiments: RI 111 included all LIF battalions in Xieng Lom; RI 112 was headquartered at Ban Houei Sai and contained LIF forces from FG/NW; and RI 113 was in Luang Prabang with LIFs from FG/E.

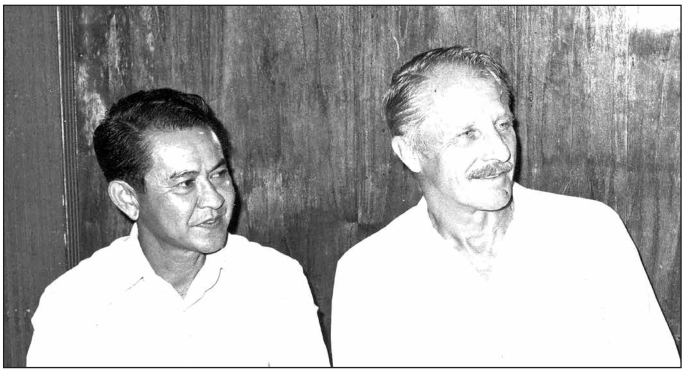
The creation of the LIF 11th Brigade was not without pain. In FG/NW, still in disarray after the loss of Nam Yu, nine irregular battalions were downsized to just one Lu, one Mien and two Lao Theung battalions. This entailed not only troop cuts, but a sharp reduction in slots for irregular officers; in some cases, former battalion commanders suddenly found themselves in charge of companies. Similarly, seven pre-ceasefire FG/E battalions were consolidated into just four.

In MR 2, LIF units were slated to form the 12th and 13th Brigades, designators shared with FAR formations in Luang Prabang and Paksane, respectively. Because Vang Pao's irregular army was in tatters following heavy combat over the previous year, most of his GMs were set to receive five weeks of retraining. This was to take place at Phou Khao Khouai, which in May 1973 was dedicated to refitting MR 2 LIF units.

Chosen as the first regiment to attend Phou Khao Khouai was GM 28. Given its five weeks of instruction by FAR instructors, GM 28 re-emerged as RI 124, core of the new 12th Brigade. Five weeks later, GM 22 graduated as RI 133 of the 13th Brigade. Next, GM 21 took its five weeks of instruction. Shortly before graduation, an attempted coup rocked Vientiane in mid-August, prompting the FAR General Staff to station one of the GM 21 battalions – BI 201 – alongside Wattay for a three-month tour. The rest of the regiment, meanwhile, returned to Long Tieng and was incorporated into the 12th Brigade.

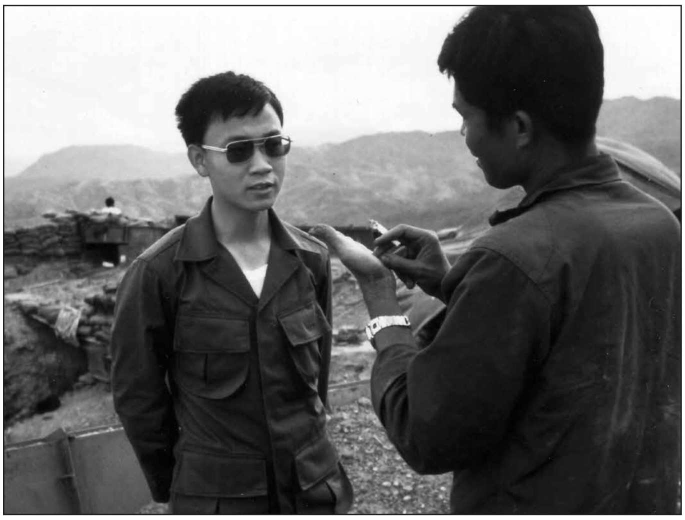
In MR 4, all three irregular GMs at ceasefire time were grouped along the Khong Sedone front. Without any retraining, changes

Vientiane Station Chief Hugh Tovar with GM 33 commander Khao Insisiengmay (left) and MR 3 commander Nouphet Daoheuang (second from left) at a Savannakhet ceremony marking the symbolic turnover of MR 3 LIF forces to FAR control, 1973. Note the MR 3 SGU logo on the podium. (Photo courtesy Tom Roberts via James Morrison)

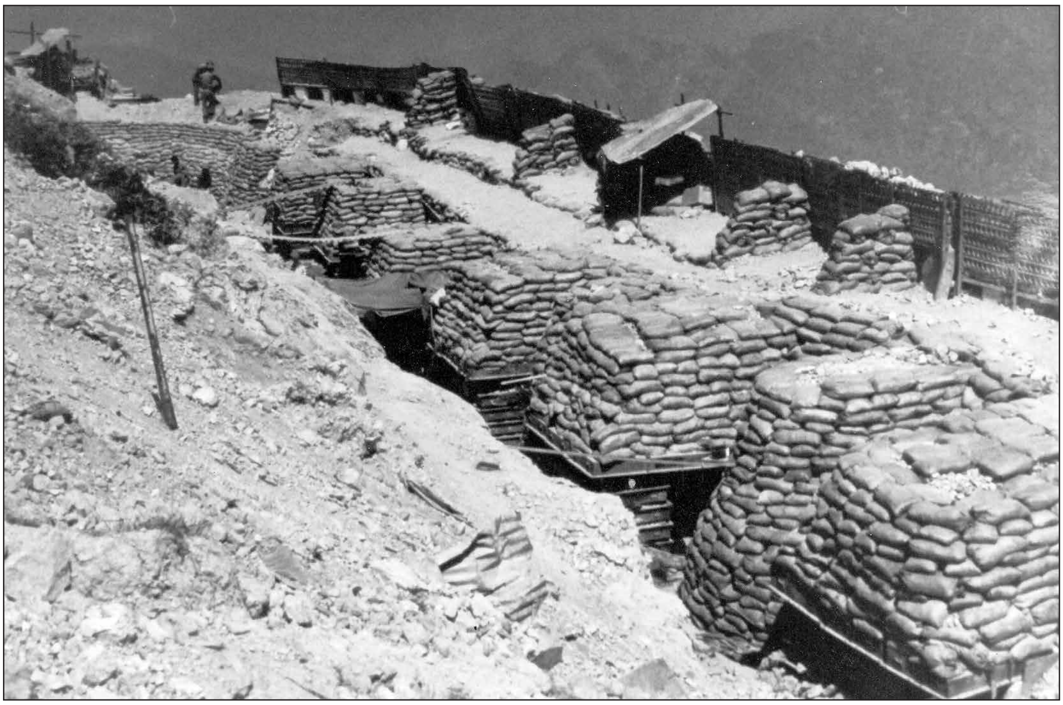


Major General Dhon, the last commander of Headquarters 333, and William Redel, the last head of the 4802nd JLD, shortly before both organisations were closed in 1974. (Photo courtesy Dhonnadit Sudhides)

MR 3 case officer John "Supercharger" Conley (second from right) discusses the integration of guerrilla forces into the FAR with U.S. Army Assistant Attaché Edmund Daley, Brigadier General Thao Ly, and FAR commander Bounpone. MR 3 guerrillas were eventually merged into the 2nd Strike Division under Thao Ly. (Photo courtesy John Conley)



Vang Chong, the 18-year-old son of General Vang Pao, converses with a Thai Unity soldier atop Skyline Ridge, 1 July 1973. Chong was on summer holiday from Staunton Military Academy in Virginia; the following year, he was accepted into West Point's Class of 1978. (Photo courtesy John Meyer)



In December 1972, work began on reinforcing the top of Skyline Two to prevent its recapture by PAVN. By the spring of 1973, the summit was a virtual Maginot Line of sandbagged bunkers, heavy-weapons positions and concertina. (Photo courtesy Chuck Campbell)

in commanders or reduction in forces, all three were redesignated as regiments in the LIF 23th Brigade/2nd Strike Division. The bulk of these regiments were then transferred down to Route 23 to hold the front line alongside Unity forces.

In MR 3, the LIF redesignation process was being handled with special care to ensure that the region's GMs – which had been so instrumental in reinforcing the PDJ, Luang Prabang and the Bolovens – remained combat effective. To begin, Savannakhet Unit held meetings on 20 and 21 May with Brigadier General Thao Ly. Following these sessions, a complete inventory of military training equipment at Nong Saphong and Whiskey-3 was handed over to Thao Ly. The

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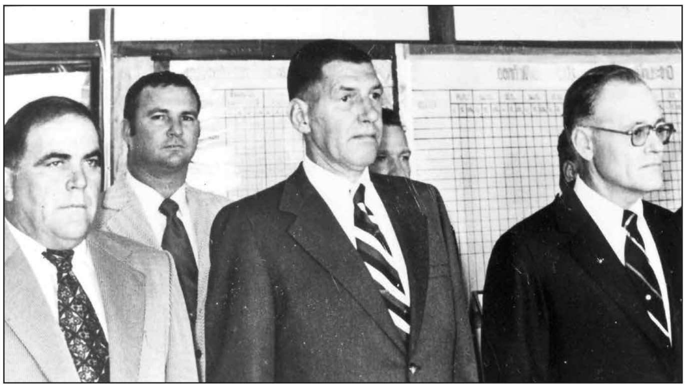
With the February 1973 ceasefire holding, on 5 July Pakse Unit informed Task Force Phasouk that Thai FAGs would soon be repatriated. Unity advisor Paul "Electric" Payne bids farewell to a group of Thai FAGs from Task Force Phasouk in mid-July before boarding a Xieng Khouang Air Transport C-47 from Pakse to Udorn. (Photo courtesy Veera Star)

general also assumed responsibility for the SGU ammunition dump near the project headquarters at Naseng. Weapons were turned over on 1 June, and administrative records four days after that.

By 1 July 1973, Savannakhet Unit's irregular support apparatus was phased out, save for a small facility retained at Whiskey-3. Also by 1 July all MR 3 GMs had been renamed. GMs 30 and 31 became RIs 213 and 212, respectively; both were assigned to the new LIF 21st Brigade of the 2nd Strike Division. GMs 32 and 33 were now RIs 222 and 223, both constituting the LIF 22nd Brigade. GM 34 was divided, one battalion to each of the above brigades.

To help guarantee that the MR 3 LIF program remained strong, the CIA took several measures. First, it dictated that no regimental or battalion commander could be changed without approval by the Savannakhet chief of unit. Similarly, any plans to move a LIF unit had to be coordinated with the chief of unit before orders were issued by the 2nd Strike Division. Most important, case officers continued to approve salaries and bonuses. General Thao Ly agreed to all these conditions.



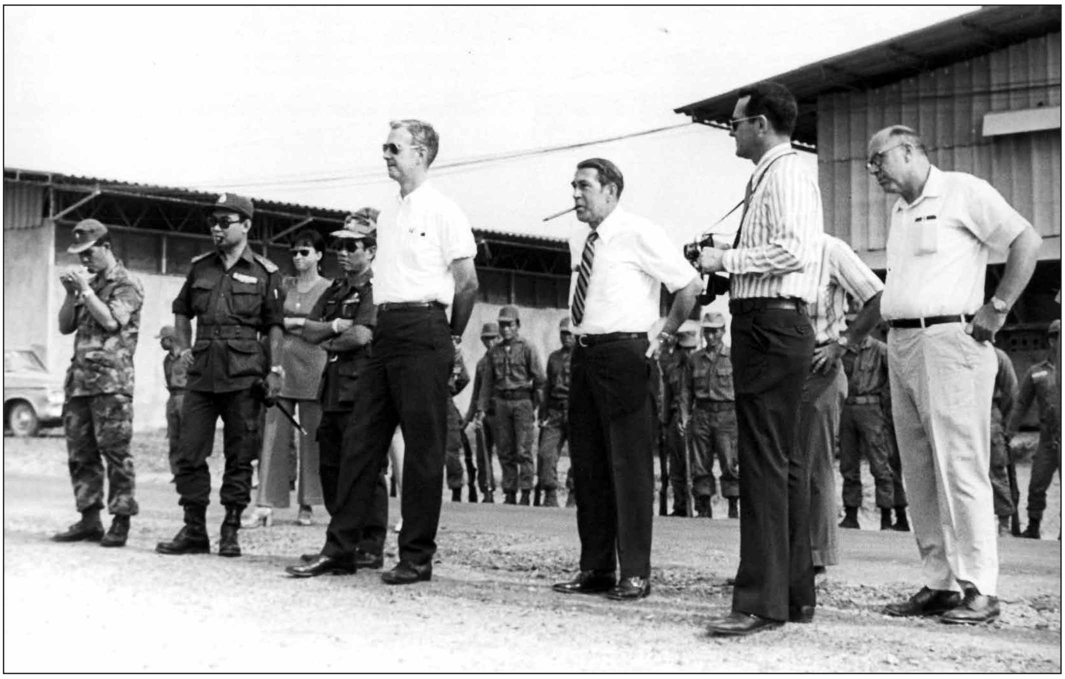
On 24 December 1973, a ceremony was held in Bangkok during which time key CIA and Headquarters 333 personnel were awarded Thailand's Exalted Order of the White Elephant. Doug Swanson, left, was the first senior advisor to the Unity program. George Morton, centre, was a legend in the U.S. Army Special Forces community who became the Chief of Operations for the 4802nd JLD. Bill Lair, right, was the first chief of the 4802nd JLD. Jim Rhyne (rear, left) was the head of fixed-wing pilots at Air America. (Photo courtesy George Morton)

Along with the integration of LIF forces into the FAR, the CIA had to contend with the future of the Thai Unity program. Anticipating an imminent truce, the U.S. Embassy in early December 1972 had proposed maintaining the entire 30-battalion (27 infantry battalions and three artillery battalions) force in Laos until its withdrawal was required under a ceasefire agreement; after that, an eight-battalion contingency force would be maintained in Thailand until the end of June 1973.

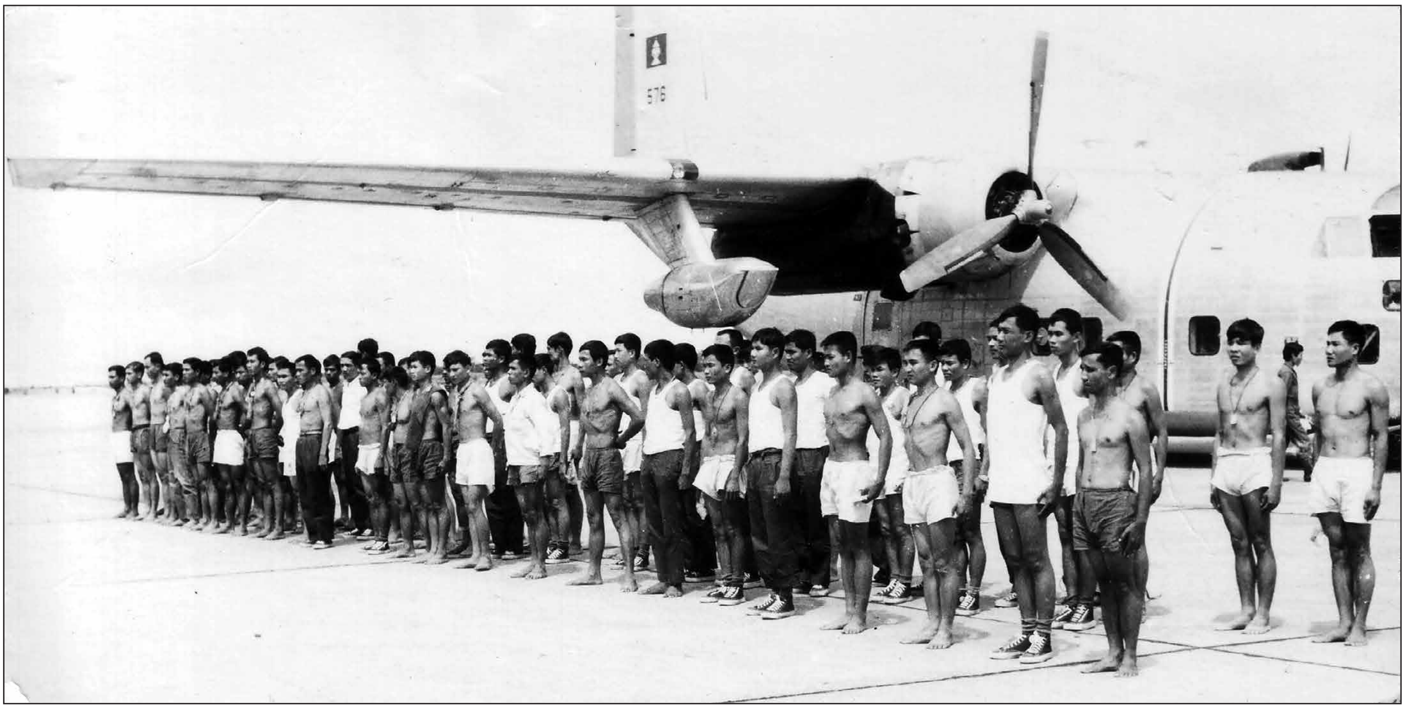
When the ceasefire did materialise in February 1973, Unity comprised 30 battalions, six heavy weapons companies, six GM staffs and three task force headquarters. Total actual strength stood at 17,808 men. Within a month, this figure had been reduced to 14,900 as volunteers, realising an end was in sight, began deserting back to Thailand in search of new employment. By mid-year, further desertions brought Unity totals down to around 10,000 men.

As of the fall of 1973, there remained 15 infantry and two artillery battalions in the Unity program. By mid-April 1974, this was down to 10 infantry battalions and one artillery battery. Two weeks later, four battalions and the artillery battery were repatriated from MR

Vientiane Station Chief Dan Arnold with Military Region 2 commander Vang Pao, circa 1974. Arnold took over the station in 1973 and remained until May 1975. (Photo courtesy Dan Arnold)



Lao and CIA officials assemble during a visit by U.S. Ambassador McMurtrie "Mac" Godley to Savannakhet, 12 April 1973. From left to right: FAR Colonel Thongsy, Defence Minister Sisouk Na Champassac, MR 3 commander Nouphet Daoheuang, Savannakhet Unit Chief Gordon Dibble, USAID Savannakhet Area Coordinator Sanford "Sandy" Stone, unknown with camera, and Tom Roberts. Roberts took over as head of paramilitary operations in MR 3 following the death of Wil Greene in April 1972. (Author's collection)



On 19 September 1974, North Vietnam trucked 150 Thai prisoners to the PDJ. Of this number, one was from the RTSF, two were Thai aviators, one was from PARU, and one was a FAG captured at Sam Thong in 1972; the remaining 145 were Unity volunteers. From the PDJ they were flown in two RLAF C-123 transports to Nam Phong camp in Thailand. There, in a ceremony overseen by the Headquarters 333 commander, Major General Dhon, most of the freed prisoners discarded their North Vietnamese-supplied clothes and came to attention in their underwear. (Author's collection)

4, closing out Task Force Phasouk. At the same time, the last two battalions were shipped home from Xieng Lom – ending Task Force Rathikoun – while one battalion was returned from MR 2.

At 1724 hours on 22 May 1974, the final three Thai battalions were recalled from Skyline and Zebra Ridge for a small parade at Long Tieng, then loaded aboard C-123s and flown home. At a cost of 1,944 dead and 543 missing over the preceding three-and-a-half years, Unity had come to a conclusion.

As a new coalition government took hold in Vientiane, all foreign military (and paramilitary) advisors were to be out by June 1974. By that time, most up-country CIA advisors had already departed. The once substantial Savannakhet program, for example, now counted just three officers: chief of operations Tom Roberts, Jim Lewis and John Conley.

In keeping with the spirit of this agreement, these last CIA advisors were quietly removed – with the exception of Hog Daniels who remained in Long Tieng to handle residual humanitarian issues with the Hmong. In addition, one paramilitary officer, Jim Sheldon, sat in the embassy to handle any remaining issues with LIF integration.

With the CIA's largest Cold War paramilitary program now over, it would be up to the FAR to defend the kingdom against further communist encroachment.

SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

This book is based heavily on interviews conducted during the 1986-1995 timeframe as part of the research for *Shadow War* (Paladin Press, 1995) co-authored with the late James Morrison. Relevant documents were obtained from the U.S. State Department Foreign Relations of the United States series, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, the Joint Publication Research Service, and the Declassified Documents Reference System. Two books that were informative were *Undercover Armies* by Thomas Ahern (Centre for the Study of Intelligence, Washington, D.C., 2006) and *Cash on Delivery* by Thomas Briggs (Rosebank Press, Rockville, Maryland, 2009).

The following persons generously provided information, either through interviews or correspondences, for the chapters in this volume (in alphabetical order):

Dan Arnold, S. Ascharya, Jim Atkins, Ken Ball, Touane Bouddhara, Houmpanh Boungnasiri, Lyle Brown, Chuck Campbell, Dave Campbell, Jerry Carlile, Eli Chavez, Jon Clemente, John Conley, Don Courtney, Bennett Crawford, Ed Dearborn, Bob Destatte, Jim Dunn, Susan Smith Finn, Al Friend, Vang Fue, Norm Gardner, Jerry Gilbert, Jim Glerum, Chuck Gutensohn, Brad Handley, Bruce Henderson, Mike Ingham, Khao Insisiengmay, Oroth Insisiengmay, Frank Jaks, Carl Jenkins, Dunc Jewell, Dick Johnson, Thomas Johnson, George Kenning, Wayne Knight, John Koren, George Kuchen, Pichit Kullavanijaya, Richard Kustra, Pat Landry, Ray Lau, Joe F. Leeker, Tom Lum, Mike Magnani, Tom Matthews, Ken McMullin, Jim Monroe, George Morton, Steve Murchison, Hugh Murray, Chanh Nosavan, George O'Dell, Arya Panya, James Parker, Gary Parrott, Paul Payne, James Pearson, Marti Peterson, Tom Poole, Merle Pribbenow, Vang Pao, Harry Pugh, Fred Rustmann, Soui Sananikone, James Schofield, Robert Shires, Steve Spence, Veera Star, Don Stephens, Dhonnadit Sudhides, Doug Swanson, MacAlan Thompson, B. Hugh Tovar, Tom Verso, Soutchay Vongsavanh, Vic Williams, Bob Wnukowski, Xay Dang Xiong, and Nick Zapata.

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The author of nearly twenty books about Asian military history and intelligence operations, Conboy's most recent title The Cambodian Wars has been called "riveting and brilliantly researched." Conboy, a graduate of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and of Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies, was also a visiting fellow at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. He has lived in Indonesia since 1992 and this is his second book for Helion's @War series.